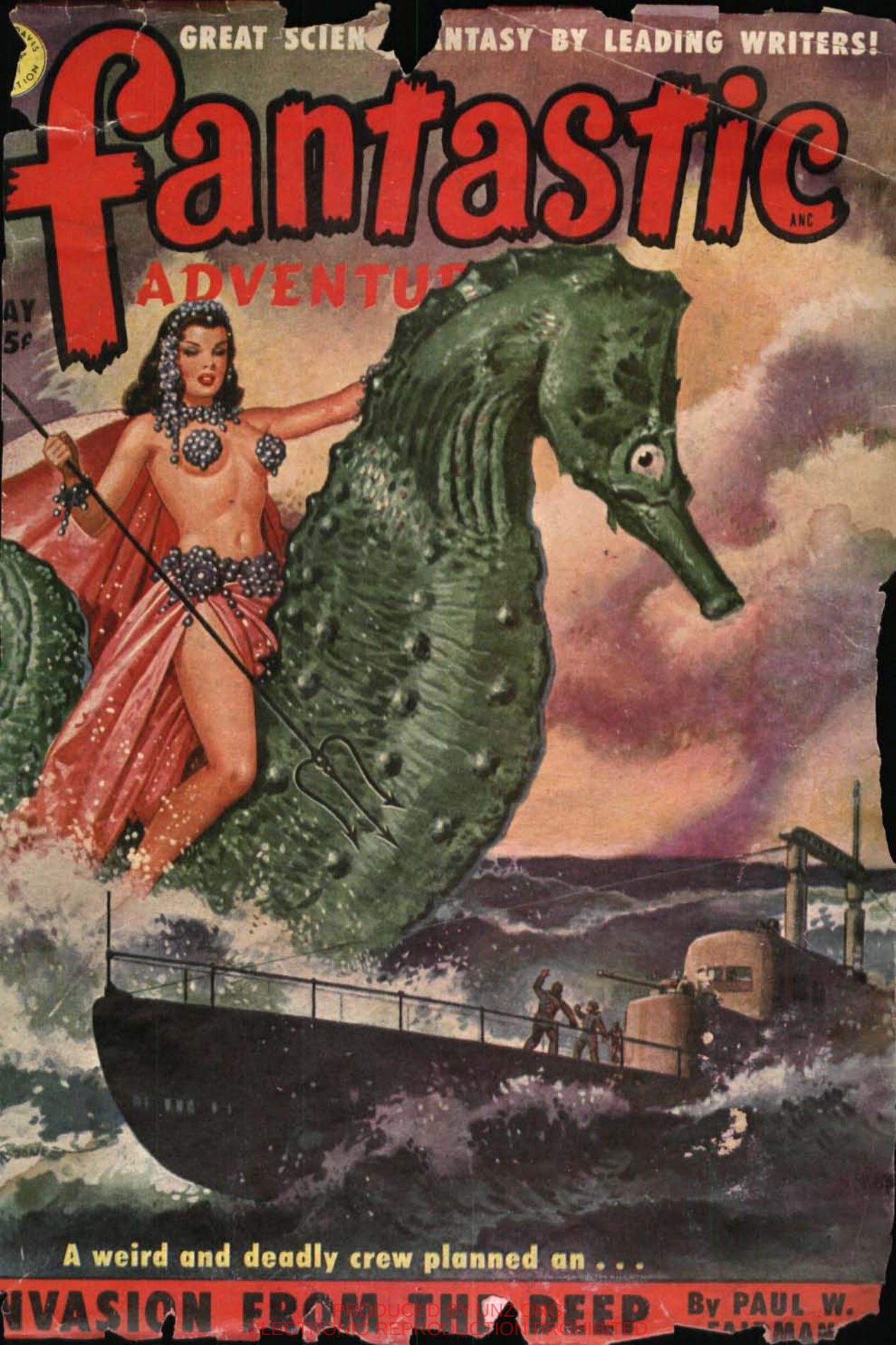

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The Editor's Notebook

A CONFIDENTIAL CHAT WITH THE EDITOR

SEVERAL of the more conservative and literary periodicals are now becoming aware of the role of science-fiction and its value in our reading curricula. Both the intellectual TOMORROW and the conservative SATURDAY REVIEW OF LITERATURE have commented in recent issues that the upsurge of popularity in space-travel fiction is well-deserved and most understandable. That in addition to being just plain escapist literature, and solely for entertainment purposes, this type of writing has grown up and now offers an adult and intelligent approach to the habits and customs of our future society and that of other planets. FANTASTIC ADVENTURES, as well as its sister magazine AMAZING STORIES, endeavors to bring you this type of story—where you will learn as well as be entertained.

FOR SOME time, we've been planning a special treat for you readers who have been asking for Virgil Finlay illustrations. So this month, four of Finlay's best efforts appear in one issue. When we were editing Paul Fairman's lead story for May ("Invasion From The Deep"), Finlay occurred to us as the artist who could best portray the symbolic type of drawings we wanted for this story—who could best give you the feeling of contrast between Llanni, Amazon beauty of the Sea, and the Earth people. You'll agree that he did a beautiful job. Both Raymond F. Jones ("...As Others See Us", page 66) and L. Sprague de Camp ("The Eye of Tandyla", page 104) wrote their manuscripts on assignment around the Virgil Finlay illustrations—and the result is a contents page to dazzle the eyes of our readers.

HENRY SHARP, one of our better illustrators, was in the office the afternoon we received Bill McGivern's "Fix Me Something To Eat" from Germany. Hank, who's known Bill for many years, was heard muttering "This I gotta read" as he retired to a quiet corner of our editorial office with the manuscript. Silence for twenty minutes—and the next thing we knew, Hank was looming over us with the story in his hands: "This I must draw!" Before we could say yes or no, both Hank and manuscript were gone. The result is on page 90, and we know you'll agree with us that this couldn't have been better executed.

WE'RE INTRODUCING with this issue an artist new to the pages of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES, but one whom we feel sure you'll like. Gerald Hohns has a brilliant background of art behind him, and we take pleasure in bringing his work for the first time to our readers.

ONE OF the most important fields of research in physics today is in cosmic rays. So little is known of these particles from outer space that governments are subsidizing investigations in an effort to learn more about them.

IN BRISTOL, ENGLAND, British physicists are preparing to use a hydrogen-filled balloon, to ascend to a height of approximately 25 miles. Two hundred fifty feet in diameter, made up of sections of extremely light plastic, and impervious to gas, the balloon will be the largest free floating sphere made by man. It will hover at the 25-mile height for some time, giving its instruments plenty of time to make recordings.

SPECIAL CAMERAS with film sensitive to the mesons and other cosmic particles will be attached to the balloon by cords. After the films have been exposed, an automatic clocking apparatus will sever the cords and permit the cameras to drop by parachute.

THE FILM will be studied square millimeter upon square millimeter under a microscope in an effort to discern the nature of the cosmic ray traces. It is interesting to note that high altitude laboratories in most of the major mountain ranges of the world are being established, with the same intention of cosmic ray research. Cosmic rays tell a good deal of what happens to matter in its most disintegrated state. Could it be that the development of the hydrogen bomb is responsible in great part for the current research activities in cosmic rays?.....LES

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fantastic ADVENTURES

MAY, 1951

All Features Complete

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VOLUME 13 NUMBER 5

All Stories Complete

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Who is there to prevent the evil genius of Tanko Darnell from destroying the entire world?

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How many of us ever get the chance to see our counterparts act out our innermost desires?

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Illepro, protected by the magic gem, conjured up Tr'lang. But the gem had lost its magic.

Front cover painting by Robert Gibson Jones, suggested by a scene from "Invasion From The Deep"

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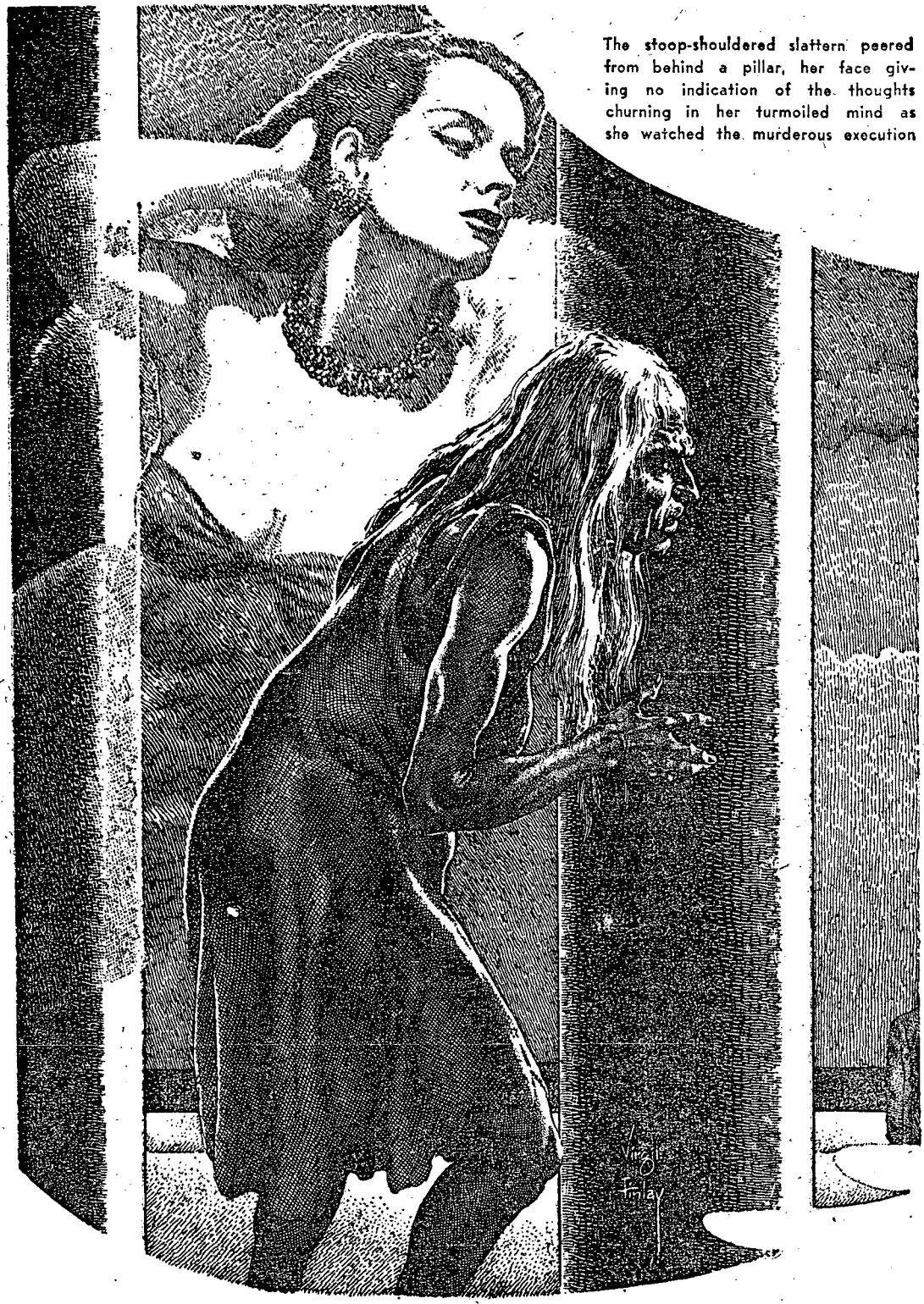

The stoop-shouldered slattern peered from behind a pillar, her face giving no indication of the thoughts churning in her turmoiled mind as she watched the murderous execution

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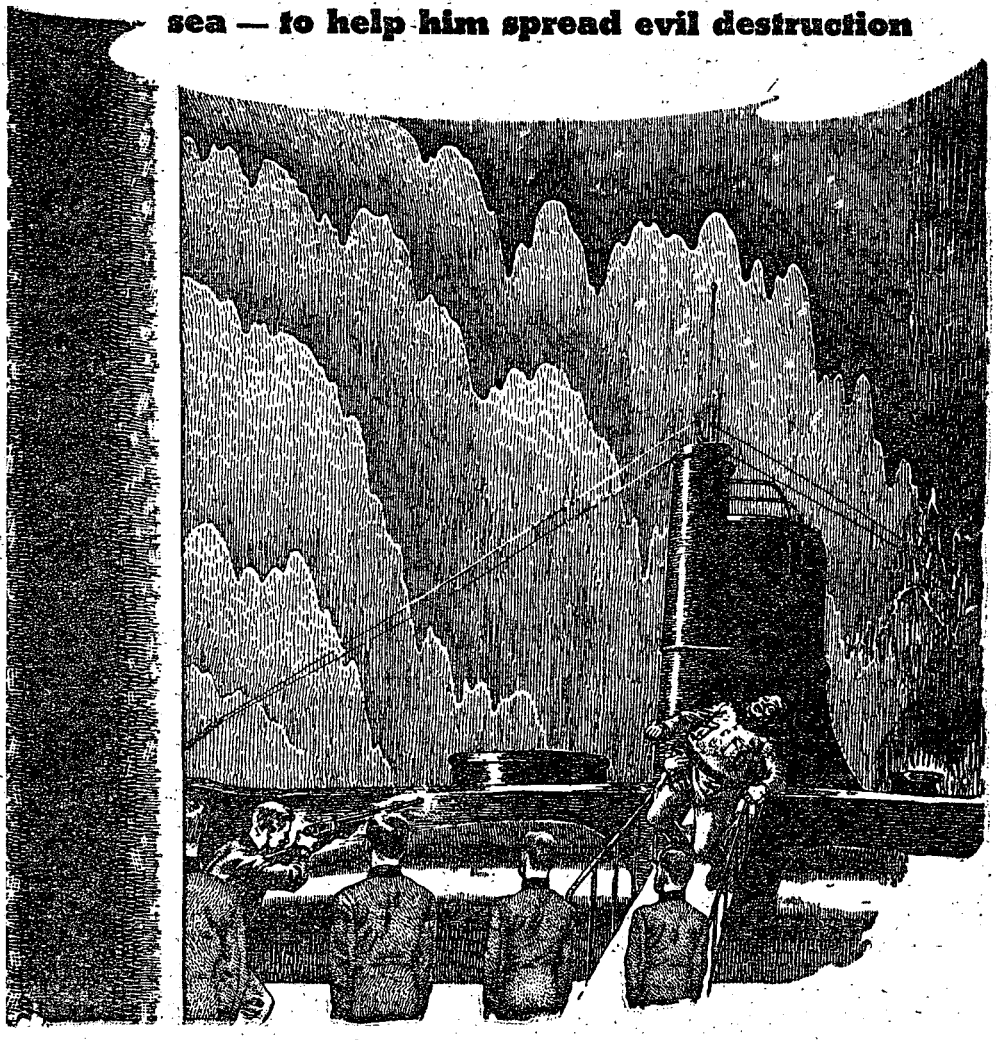
INVASION FROM THE DEEP

He kidnapped his victims from Earth, and brought them down to the land below the sea — to help him spread evil destruction



By Paul W. Fairman

LLANNI WAS sick at heart. She was frightened and bewildered. She wanted to die. She knew her own land and water was Munesia. But she had ridden her galfin up through the Forbidden Place. She had committed sacrilege. Now, she was in this land and water which was not Munesia. Here, she ate continuously of fear and dread because this was

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the punishment of her gods.

The Forbidden Place was a chimney in the waters over Munesia. Even when very young, in the shoals, she had been told the first law of the gods: Stay away from the Forbidden Place. This is Munesia. This is sufficient for the Munans. Beyond, all is emptiness and death. Stay in Munesia and the gods will always smile.

But Llanni was one of the rare ones. One without fear and overburdened with curiosity. But now she had great fear and great anguish because the strange ones had found her outside of Munesia. She had been brought to this place, not knowing she was huge and naked and beautiful. But knowing the creatures that had brought her here were small and ugly and repulsive.

This place was also ugly. Not like the bright, warm, gorgeously colored Munesia where all was provided by the gods. She had been brought here on her galfin and put into this invisible enclosure from which she could not escape. And not knowing why she could not escape. It was maddening and terrible to be held prisoner by nothing. The nothing was all around her and at first she had not seen it. She had ridden her galfin against it and it had hurled her backward. In panic, she had rushed in all directions, only to find the hard, painful nothing everywhere about her. And this while the loathsome little creatures stood beyond the nothing and laughed with glee.

Then she had seen the nothing, vaguely. It was a magical emptiness which gave off a dim reflection of herself and her galfin as had the warm, sweet waters of Munesia. So she came to know the nothingness as the places where the air and water of her prison ended against hardness, and she could see herself dimly looking in from beyond the prison.

The creatures were many in number. They came up from the waters below in long peculiar craft. The craft were much larger than the creatures and were not to be sat in, but to be gotten into completely. They rose up out of the waters and opened in the middle. Then, the creatures poured forth in a stream and went about their strange business. And in the midst of her fear and heartsickness, Llanni marveled. She was amazed that the gods could devise all this horrible complication merely to punish one Munan for going through the Forbidden Place. Truly, it was the most terrible of all sins. Often Llanni bowed her head and asked the gods that she be allowed to die. That her punishment should finally end. But it did not end. It went on and on. And she did not die.

The creatures began paying her less and less attention. Only at intervals now did a few of them come to stare at her. They stared with a peculiar hot look in their eyes and a burning hunger in their faces. With a frightening intensity. With desire.

But there was one who came often and who always laughed. He seemed somehow to be above the rest. More confident, and they all looked to him for guidance in their meaningless affairs. He was thick and solid—uglier than the others—and his laughter boomed out like thundering waters. Then he would go away, to come back at some later time and laugh again.

Llanni hated him more than all the rest, and when he came to gaze upon her, she wanted more than ever to die. He was dark, gross, ugly. He wore a great mat of hair under his face, and the sight of him sickened Llanni.

DARK, GROSS, and ugly were the words for this man who strode, after nightfall, through the streets

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of Washington, D. C. Thick were his legs and his great barrel of a body. Heavy and dark was the curly beard he wore. Square and full ten inches long the beard, yet it covered but little of his great chest.

He was different, this man; one of those rare human creatures, charged and vibrant with the undefinable. This was sensed—uneasily—by the people he passed in the street. None came abreast him, but their eyes were drawn sidewise to inspect him—and always with a little uncertainty—with a certain instinctive fearfulness. Never a smile in the eyes; never a glance of casual good will as many have for even a stranger passing. Always uncertainty, fear and a quick straightening of the eyes with obvious relief after passing.

The man walked in a straight line, veering never an inch to either side; full into the crowds that thinned and thickened. And the opening was always there for him to pass through with room to spare. He knew exactly where he was going, and upon arriving there, he climbed a flight of stairs and knocked with vigor on the frosted glass of a boarding house door; a once genteel door in a once genteel house—now a sad and discouraged door in a house that hung its head.

A lady opened the door, and he said abruptly: "A young man named Nicholas Holiday rooms here. A young government employee. He hasn't the price of even a motion picture show in his pocket, so he is no doubt at home. I wish to speak with him."

The lady backed away and opened the door without realizing it. "Nick—Nicholas Holiday lives here," she admitted.

The man entered the dim hallway with an air of owning not only the carpet, building, and block, but also the lady's immortal soul. "I will go up. His room number?"

"Third on the left from the head of the stairs."

THE MAN ascended, and the lady went back into her kitchen and sat again by a cup of tea. She felt a trifle chilly and drew a shawl close around her shoulders. The man reached the upper hallway, counted three and knocked. After knocking, he turned the door knob and entered the room.

He said, "Good evening, Nicholas Holiday. My name is Tanko Darnell. Yes, thank you. I'll sit down."

A young man of perhaps twenty-three or four had been stretched informally across the bed over an open book. He closed the book and sat up erect, and there was outrage and anger in his eyes. But as Tanko Darnell sat down and balanced a black derby hat on his knees, the hostility left Nick Holiday's face. Not erased completely, but rather cast over and rendered harmless by an uneasy bewilderment.

"Might I ask—"

"You certainly may," the bearded man returned heartily. He was capable of speaking no other way. "I'll clear up a great deal in a few words. Never liked beating around the bush. First, I know all about you, son. Made a point of finding out."

"Now, just a minute!"

"You have a job in a minor branch of Government Intelligence, decoding hum-drum chit-chat from foreign capitals that local envoys and ambassadors don't even bother to read. Nothing of importance ever gets to you. That's all taken care of upstairs. You've been trying like the devil to get an appointment to Secret Intelligence, so you can slink about the globe and act out the plot of a grade-B cinema. But eight months

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have passed and nothing has happened. You'd like to go over and take a crack at the Eastern Federation all by yourself—possibly get a line on those unidentified subs off the East Coast, that both the Union of Nations and the Eastern Federation accuse each other of owning. But they won't give you a crack at it, even though you think you're well qualified, and now your patriotism is beginning to wear thin at the elbows."

The man Tanko Darnell had not remained seated for long. He'd gotten to his feet and was now pacing rapidly up and down the small room, charging it with his personality.

Nick Holiday got to his feet, also, but the avenue along the bedside was narrow and Darnell would have collided with him in passing. So Holiday sat down again. But he voiced a protest: "Where did you find out all that?"

TANKO DARNELL ignored the question. "You're wrong, of course. You're not qualified for espionage work, and the government knows it. Your talents as a linguist are rare indeed, but they don't suit you for cloak and dagger work." Darnell stopped and faced the youth. "By the way, how many are there? The languages you've mastered. Eleven or twelve?"

"Fourteen."

"And that does not include several Chinese dialects that would baffle even the Union of Nations interpreters. Amazing. Really amazing. I want you, Holiday. That's what I came here for. To get you. Twelve thousand a year."

Holiday had—just prior to Darnell's entrance—finished counting the money in his pocket. It hadn't been enough for an evening at the neighborhood movie. It consisted of a dime and several pennies, the morrow being payday. Thus it was, possibly, that the mention of twelve thousand dollars was even more startling than Darnell himself.

Holiday muttered, "Twelve thou—"

"Not a dime more. Don't believe in overpaying people. But, of course, there will be all living expenses over and above that."

"Where—where is the job located?"

Darnell had a way of not answering questions. "You see, I'm surrounded by every nationality on the globe. Hire them by the dozens. Swedes, Italians, Croats, Slavs, Chinese, Latins. Raw bone and muscle out of practically every country on earth. So I've got to have somebody to talk to them. To tell them what I say, and find out what they answer back. An interpreter, son. That's why I want you. Are you ready?"

No man could have called Nick Holiday a weakling, a willow bent by any breeze, if he'd said yes. For stronger men than he had been bowled over, wrapped up and carried away by the overpowering Darnell. In fact, it was greatly to the blond youth's credit when he stuttered weakly, "Well, now... after all... this is a little sudden."

"Of course. Of course. Take a couple of days to think it over. But there's no reason why you shouldn't come out to my place for a drink. Get to know me a little better. I'll see you're brought back."

Nick Holiday could find no logical reason for declining the invitation. And with the thoughts of the sudden money in his mind, he did not try too strenuously. In somewhat of a daze, he followed Darnell down the stairs and into the street, buttoning his coat as he went.

TANKO DARNELL waved down a cab. They got in and Darnell gave directions to the driver. Nick Holi-

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day's eyes questioned and Darnell said, "I've got a boat on the Potomac." Then, without a pause, he went on: "Tell me—what's your opinion of the world situation? Are you betting on war?"

It passed through Nick's mind that Darnell's "place," mentioned so casually, had now turned into a boat. A yacht perhaps? Nick said, "My opinion isn't worth much, but I don't see how war can be avoided."

"Why not?"

Nick did not answer immediately. The basic facts of this situation came to him suddenly, and he scarcely heard Tanko Darnell's question. In a matter of moments, he—an obscure government clerk—had been lifted from his small world of frustration and gloom up into a strata of glamor and unreality.

And his native caution spoke to him. It said: These things don't happen. Unimportant people such as you, are not picked up and made secure over night. And if such fortunate lightning does strike, the procedure is far different from this. Stop and think what you're doing. Beware of this man.

"You haven't answered me," Darnell said.

Caution spoke again: Beware, I say! Why should your opinion of world affairs mean anything to this bearded stranger? Does he look like a man who would care a dime's worth whether you expect war or not? Get out of this cab while there are still lights and people and policemen around you.

But the promise of a thousand dollars each and every month—the offer made so casually by Tanko Darnell—was a strong temptation; one which caused Nick to seek arguments in defense of his actions.

Nick took issue with caution: Why shouldn't this man select me for the job? I'm able to fill it. And who am I to be suspicious of good luck when it comes my way?

Tanko Darnell leaned back and laughed heartily. "Never mind. It doesn't matter. It's just my way of getting acquainted. I like to know the men who work for me."

Don't you see? caution inquired. Are you too stupid to find the motive behind his chatter? He's just trying to keep your mind off the important issues—to keep you from asking questions. There's something terribly evil about this man. Get out now—while there's time!

But twelve thousand dollars a year—

Fool! Idiot! Dolt! Then at least ask the questions that want asking!

"What sort of business are you in, Mr. Darnell?"

"Business? Oh, I have wide and varied interests. I'm what you might call an opportunist, in that all my life I've checked the wind and figured out which way it was blowing. Not only that, but I've continually tried to predict which way it would blow tomorrow."

"I—I see."

You do? caution sneered.

"Sometimes I've been right," Darnell went on, "and sometimes I've been wrong, but I've discovered it costs money to be in error, and I've tried to keep my mistakes to the minimum."

AGAIN CAUTION—caustic, disgusted: Clever, this scoundrel. What kind of an answer was that? What did it tell you? Get out I say!

A thousand dollars every month!

Promises are cheap. I can offer you ten thousand, and I haven't got a cent in my pants. You're being a damned fool, Nick Holiday.

"A beautiful city," Darnell commented with his usual heartiness.

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"I've always liked Washington. A city of great importance. And as things are now, the most important city on earth. They come here from all over the world with their various schemes and motives."

Ask him about his schemes. See if he'll throw a little light on his own motives.

All you want to do is keep me broke, Nick told caution fiercely.

All I want to do is keep you alive and out of trouble. Ask him!

"You mentioned a great many men in your employ—men of different nationalities. Are they—?"

"Yes. I select my help very carefully."

He's not lying about that! He must have to comb the globe to find such fools as you.

"I visit countries all over the world and pick the best of the lot wherever I go. I search carefully, and when I find the man I want—the sky is the limit so far as his chances are concerned."

"In what field?"

"In my field, of course. The men you'll have contact with will be engaged mainly in construction work."

There. That's a direct answer. Does it satisfy you?

No! Construction work? What kind? Where? Why?

"Your job will be to keep me posted as to what they're thinking and what they say among themselves. I like to keep my finger on the pulse of things, and if there is anything I can do to keep my employees happy, I want to know what it is."

How is that?

Sickening! It turns my stomach. This liar is a hypocrite. This smirking hypocrite is an unmitigated liar. Good lord, Nick! Can't you see it? This man is evil.

Abruptly, from Darnell: "So you're expecting war, eh?"

"As I said, I'm really not qualified to—"

"Doesn't matter, really. Time to get out now." And Nick sensed a tone of relief in Darnell's heavy voice.

The cab swerved and came to a stop. Tanko Darnell leaned over and threw open the door with a savage gesture. He clambered out and Nick followed.

While Darnell paid the driver, Nick stood looking off through the gloom across the broad stretches of the Potomac River. Here and there were the lights of water-borne craft bobbing at anchor or plying the wide channel. Just ahead was the outline of a dark, jutting pier.

"Here," Darnell said, and led a confident way toward the pier and out toward its far end. A shadow loomed, to become a snub-nosed power boat; then two smaller shadows that moved and were men.

A voice: "That you, boss?"

"It's me. We have a passenger."

The men came closer and Nick smelled strong tobacco. "How'll we handle this one? Like the last?"

"No, you fool. The last one was a girl. Like the one before that."

No further instructions were needed. At the same moment that Nick tightened with suspicion and drew back, a blackjack dropped like a ridgepole across his skull. A larger, darker shadow lowered around him. But this one remained a shadow as Nick passed out.

THREE TIMES since she'd been put into the water and the air, around which nothingness formed a trap, Llanni had watched the ugly leader of these creatures enter the strange craft and go down into the waters at the edge of the land. Each time ere he embarked, he come to stand and gaze at her. To stand ar-

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rogant with his hands on his hips, his head thrown backward, gazing up at the broad expanse of her nakedness. Nakedness worn by Llanni without cringing, for she knew it not as a shameful or a lust-provoking thing. She did not know these repulsive little creatures wore clothing. The skin of them appeared loose and ungainly, but she took it to be a part of them, just as her own smooth skin had been her own at birth.

On each of these occasions, the leader had always grown quiet after his great guffaws of laughter and had stared soberly. Then, he'd had food brought and had stood by with some semblance of hopefulness. Llanni was aware that these horrible little creatures wanted her to take food. Many and various substances had been brought and tossed into her prison. First had come the dead bodies of fish. These Llanni ignored. They took this to mean she did not subsist upon raw fish, and they were right. Then, at intervals, came many materials and substances, until they finally dumped in some fruits and green things not unlike the viands of her mourned and ever-lost Munesia.

But still Llanni did not eat. She knew that if she abstained long enough, she would die. This she yearned to do. At first, she was afraid to deliberately die by starvation for fear of offending the gods. This was her punishment, and only the gods could decree how long it must last until death came to return her lost freedom. And she pondered the question: If I do not eat by my own decision, am I interfering with the gods? If I shorten the time of my punishment by my own action, will my punishment satisfy them? She was not sure one way or another. So she said a prayer, asking forgiveness in advance, and then set herself against the taking of food.

But the ugly one never seemed to give up hope. Especially before he went under the waters in the odd craft, did he seem to wish her to take food. Instead, while he watched, she would mount her green galfin, which remained full of pentup energy from the variety of food presented, and would ride around and around her prison until she became dizzy. Afterwards, she would sink to the bottom of the waters and lie motionless.

Each time when the ugly one left, she experienced relief and hoped he would not come back. But each time he returned, to stand in front of her and roar with laughter. And each time she hated him more.

Now, he had been gone for some time. Much longer, she believed, than either of the previous times. Maybe this time he would not return. Maybe, she hoped, he is dead. Soon, she also hoped, she too would die. She would search herself for signs of the weakness which should inevitably come from starvation. But she remained discouragingly strong. Death, she found, did not come easily. Death, like all other great favors, must be earned by obedience to the gods.

NICK HOLIDAY came to with a splitting head and a thick tongue. He opened his eyes and found himself to be in a place that wavered and glistened as though built of water. He blinked his eyes, brought them into focus, and the place solidified into a small room with no windows, but containing the bunk upon which he lay, a wash basin, a table and an overhead bulb which gave off electric light.

Nick came groggily to a sitting position, and at that moment the room seemed to tilt slightly forward upon its foundations. The harrassed youth charged this off to his own unstable condition, and lay back again for a

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while.

He strove not to think, but to maintain a mental vacancy in the gradually lessening sickness of his being. Then the natural questions: Where am I? What place is this? Why was I knocked out on the pier and brought into this room? What? Where? Why?

Then, relatively clear headed, he got to his feet, and again the room tilted forward under his feet and he was forced to a conclusion. This was not a room, but a cabin on a ship; a ship probably in motion. He glanced over the walls looking for a porthole. He found none and turned toward the small, high-silled door. At that moment, the door opened and a girl came in.

She was full bosomed, more so than the slightness of her seemed to justify, and withal, rather lovely. Copper hair glinted in the light from the unshaded bulb overhead. Low-heeled shoes and excellent legs disappeared under a blue skirt just below her knees. A blue jacket fitted her curves snugly.

But the girl's blue eyes were filled with apprehension and concern. She said, "I've been keeping an eye on you. Sorry I wasn't here when you came out of it. You're feeling pretty woozy, I imagine."

Nick Holiday's reply could have been classed as boorish. "Who are you?" he demanded bluntly.

The girl smiled as she gave him the benefit of his unsettled condition. "My name is Wava Malloy."

"Where am I—are we? On a boat?"

"We are in a submarine—submerged. We are heading for the Caribbean area of the Atlantic Ocean."

NICK SAT down on the bunk and lowered his head into his hands. "Your friends play rough," he muttered.

She sat down beside him, laid a light hand upon his head and drew back his hair that she might inspect the purple lump above his left ear. "A good workmanlike job," she commented, "but—you're jumping to conclusions."

"I am?"

"Not that I blame you, but they aren't my friends. I'm sure I know little more about them than you do."

"How did you get here?"

"About the same way you did. No one hit me over the head, but they threw a blanket over me and gave me a small dose of some narcotic. I arrived in a twilight sleep. I came a couple of days before you did. You were the last. Now, we're headed south."

Nick raised his head and studied the girl. He liked what he saw, and under other circumstances, he would have liked it much better. "I guess I don't have to tell you that you're talking in riddles."

"Then I guess I better keep right on talking until it becomes clearer. I'm a stenographer, typist, and bookkeeper working in Stamford, Connecticut. I was born in Michigan, but both my parents are dead and I'm really all alone. One evening, that bearded man. Tanko Darnell, came to my rooming house and—"

"He seems to specialize on people in rooming houses," Nick muttered.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing."

"He came and offered me a job in my line at a fabulous salary. Twelve thousand a year."

Nick got to his feet and went to the wash basin and drew a glass of water. "That's what everybody gets. Our friend's in a rut. Is this water drinkable."

"I think so. I wanted time to consider the deal, but he lured me to the docks on the pretext of joining him for dinner on his boat. Two men showed up and I got the works with

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the blanket."

A thought struck Nick. He set the glass down and turned to look at Wava Malloy. "You take it well. You've got a lot of courage."

She shrugged. "I've had to take care of myself most of my life. That makes for a realistic attitude. Frankly, I'm scared stiff, but there's nothing to be done that I can see. No use getting all worked up."

"What's happened to you since you arrived aboard?"

"I've been given every consideration. So far as I can determine, I'm the only female aboard, although another might pop up any minute. Darnell's two huskies aren't human, I think. They're a pair of automatons he's created out of flesh and blood for the sole purpose of having his orders carried out."

NICK RUBBED his head and said nothing.

"When I came to, I was given an audience with Darnell in his cabin." Wava Malloy stopped speaking. Her eyes went vague as she stared at the wall.

"Well—go on."

"He's a strange man. The strangest man I've ever seen. Somehow, I don't think he's human either. He gave me the score in very few words."

"And the score is—?"

"We're going to some place he neglected to locate or describe. There was no misrepresentation about what I was hired for. I'm to keep his books, take his dictation, type his records." Her eyes widened as though a sudden thought had struck, and she repeated: "His records. You know—as precise as the man seems to be—that's odd. His records. Not his correspondence. Not his letters. His records. Do you suppose that's an indication of anything?"

"I couldn't say at the moment."

"Anyhow, he told me I had nothing to fear if I did my work well, and, also, he told me to look after you."

"Look after me?"

"Yes. He said I was to watch for you to wake up and see if there was anything you want."

"And if there is?"

"Then, I suppose I go and try to find it for you. No restrictions have been put on my activities. I go anywhere I want to—if I'm able."

"What do you mean?"

"Most of the doors are locked. I've found a comfortable lounge up forward. I've seen the crew at work, but always through the thick glass of a locked door. Also, I've seen some of the other passengers aboard; seen them through glass. Roughly dressed men lounging in large cabins; men of various nationalities, from their appearance."

"But you could get no information?"

"No. The crew ignored me completely."

"And the passengers?"

She flushed. "Well, not exactly. They talked to me and among themselves. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but you see—I can read lips."

"Quite obviously then," Nick commented, drily, "the passengers at least are human beings."

She smiled. "When you feel fit, I'm supposed to take you to Darnell's cabin. That, I think, about covers it. Now, you might give me a thumbnail sketch concerning yourself."

NICK SHRUGGED. "It reads a great deal like your own. I had a job decoding cables for the government, when this character walked into my room and offered me twelve thousand a year to go to work for him. But he wasn't interested in codes.

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I have a pretty good mastery of languages and I'm supposed to act as his interpreter. Or so he said. From there on out, he ran true to form. Offered to take me to dinner. Got me down on the pier. Bopped me. Here I am."

He got to his feet. "And now I'd like to have a few words with our employer. Lead the way."

Without comment, the girl led him forward through a narrow companionway and stopped before a brass-studded door. She knocked, and the voice bidding her enter was a deep rumble that vibrated under the low ceiling. She pointed to the door, turned and went back as she'd come. Then she paused, to turn and offer some advice in a whisper: "Take it easy, Nick. No use playing it rough, from what I can see. All it would get you is a broken head."

Nick Holiday went inside and closed the door after him. Seated at a large desk was the huge figure of Tanko Darnell. A prodigious cigar was clamped in his ugly mouth and, as Nick entered, he swung around on his swivel chair and laid the cigar in an ash tray. "Feeling better now?"

Nick said, "I demand to be put ashore."

"Sit down."

"And if you think I won't prefer charges—"

"Sit down!"

Nick wasn't aware of quite how it happened, but he found himself suddenly seated and mute. Tanko Darnell began speaking: "That's better. You have some questions, of course, and I know exactly what they are. Just sit still and I'll answer them." He picked up a speaking tube, blew into it, and then said, "Bring in Langley."

In an amazingly short time, three men entered the cabin. Two of them, Nick knew, were the pair from the dark pier, and he wondered idly which one had slugged him.

The other was a gray-eyed man cloaked in belligerence and hostility. He was middle-aged and held in check by the two muscle men. Also, he gave every indication that the holding was needed.

Tanko Darnell indicated the man with a wave of his hand while speaking to Nick. "This is Frank Langley. An efficiency expert. I checked and found he was the man to help me get more work out of my men. Too bad I won't be able to use him."

"You're goddamned right you won't!" Langley bellowed. "And I'll see you electrocuted for kidnapping, Darnell. Shanghaiing men into your damn pig-boat! That went out with the steam tubs!"

DARNELL stared at the man with an odd impersonal light in his eyes. But also with a mixed look of contempt and pity. "You blasted idiot! Don't you know you can't do anything to me? That you're entirely helpless? Yet you stand there threatening me. Haven't you got any sense at all?"

And with that, he took a revolver from his desk drawer and shot Langley between the eyes.

Nick Holiday sat frozen as the thunder echoed and died in the small cabin. His eyes found the two men and he noted that not a muscle in either of their faces had moved; not one iota of expression changed.

"Take him out," Tanko Darnell said, a trifle wearily as he dropped the gun back into the drawer.

The two men turned and went out, carrying the limp corpse between them. The door closed.

"Does that answer any of your questions?" Darnell asked.

"Not exactly," Nick replied when he could find his voice, "but I get the

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idea you meant to put over."

"I'm glad of that. Glad I held up the killing for you to see. Sometimes one example is worth hours of conversation." His eyes traveled to the door and he shook his head, frowning. "I missed badly on Langley. That doesn't happen very often. My percentage is pretty good."

"I'd still like to ask a few questions."

"Go ahead."

"All right. Why did you have me banged over the head? Couldn't you have asked me point blank to come of my own free will?"

"It would have been a waste of time. I couldn't tell you where we are going. Too risky. And I wanted to leave immediately. I couldn't wait around while you and the rest of them cleaned up your affairs."

"But, good lord man! How many inquiries do you think you've opened by these methods? How many law-enforcement bodies do you think will be on your trail? A battleship could pick you up any minute!"

"NOT A CHANCE," Darnell said easily, then shrugged. "Oh, I'll admit there's a chance, but it's a long one, and when a man plays for big stakes, he's got to take a few chances. Any more questions?"

"I take it this enterprise is illegal."

"That's right."

"Another thing. How did you get the information about me? And why did you pick me for the job?"

"I won't bother answering that. No point in merely satisfying idle curiosity. And now I'll ask one: Are you going to go along with me and cooperate?"

Nick's grin was without humor. "After what I just witnessed—what do you think?"

Tanko Darnell leaned forward. "I like you, boy. I like frankness. I've always believed in getting to the point."

"Then I'll go right on being frank. Am I right in assuming that human life means absolutely nothing to you?"

"You are," Darnell replied, snapping his fingers. "Manpower is the cheapest commodity in the world. Treating it in any manner other than complete impersonality has been many a leader's downfall. Napoleon fell when he began going soft and worrying about the lives of his men."

"But couldn't that attitude leave a person with damn few friends?"

"I'm not interested in discussing that angle of it," Darnell snapped. "I have no desire for friends."

"Sorry. It slipped out. I think it's just that I can't get used to the thought of working for a man who'd shoot me down in my tracks the way he would a rabbit."

"You do your job, and you won't get shot."

Nick got to his feet. "I can think of no better way to keep a man on his toes."

"There is no better way."

"Well, a lot of points have been cleared up. Not all of them, but a lot. For instance—you haven't told me where we're going?"

"I don't intend to. A waste of words. You wouldn't believe me."

"Nor what I'm to do now."

"Amuse yourself. You have the run of the sub, except for the locked doors. Make love to my new typist. You should be able to break down any resistance in the time you have ahead."

"Thanks a lot. But just now, I'm afraid any such exertions would give me a headache."

Darnell turned back to his desk. "Oh, yes. Take care of that head. Quite a lump you've got there." And his roaring laughter signalled the end of the interview.

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AS THE DAYS went on and the gods refused to end her punishment, Llanni did not become reconciled to her fate. Rather, it became more intolerable and her wild heart pounded more violently when it should have weakened. At times, unable to find control, she mounted her galfin and fled in a frantic circle around her prison.

During these unleashed protestations, the despised little creatures stopped what they were doing to watch. There was not so much laughter now, though Llanni did not notice this, so occupied was she with her own miseries.

Upon this day, she went around and around until the water was frothed to the whiteness of a millrace and the little creatures seemed fearful the prison would fly apart. But it held and finally, the galfin exhausted, Llanni slipped to the bottom of the pool and lay with her beautiful face close to the hard nothingness which held her captive.

As she lay there, two of the little creatures came close and stood staring in at her. They looked through the glass and shook their heads. One said, "Well, by God, maybe there's nothing of a woman about her except the look of a woman. Maybe her blood is colder than a woman's and everything inside different, but by God her tears are the same!"

Llanni saw the lips of the creature move, but she did not hear the words, and the words would have meant nothing even if she had heard them. But as the creatures turned away, Llanni saw something new in their faces. Something she had not seen before.

Pity.

NICK SAID, "I just saw a man shot down in cold blood."

Wava Malloy asked, "One of—us?"

"A man named Langley. An efficiency expert Darnell captured. But Langley had no sense. He wouldn't hold still, so Darnell shot him down like a dog."

"I think Darnell is crazy."

"Did you ever have any doubt of it? He's stark raving mad. This whole deal proves it."

The girl shuddered slightly and Nick, seated on a lounge beside her, felt the shudder in the flesh that touched his.

"I hope," Wava said, "that he doesn't have—have any weakness—"

"For women? I'm inclined to think not. I'm not sure, but he gave me sort of a clue."

"How so?"

"He suggested I pass the time by trying to make you."

She flamed and turned to face him. "Nick!"

He stared straight ahead, as though so engrossed in the problems at hand that the crudeness of his statement had escaped him completely. And indeed it had. In his mind was only the forbidding vision of Tanko Darnell.

Nick said, "That isn't the statement of a man who would be interested in you himself."

"You put the words into my mouth. What I meant was weakness for liquor. A man that bad when he's sober would be a devil incarnate when drunk."

"I don't think he's a stinker either." Nick got suddenly to his feet, ran frantic fingers through his hair, and raged. "Oh, damn it all to hell! What's this all about, anyhow? Why the secrecy, even if he is beyond the law?"

He turned just in time to catch the tail-end of an odd look in Wava's eyes. "Beyond the law?"

"Yes. He admitted to me that his

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project is illegal. But he's got us cold, so why won't he tell us what it is and where we're going?"

"We just have to keep on staying alive—not crossing him—and find out eventually."

Nick sat down again. "That's the only point we can be sure about—the only one that stands out clearly. It would be absolutely fatal to cross the man in any way. We do what's expected of us—or we die."

"You think that was why he killed Langley?"

"Not why he killed him—no! Langley was murdered because he refused to submit to kidnapping. It was the manner of the killing I refer to. Darnell staged it when I was in his cabin, before my eyes, as a warning to us of what would happen if we followed Langley's course. The man is made of ice and without heart. He's trying to achieve some objective—what it is, we don't know—and no man or devil is going to stand in his way."

"Do you think we will get out alive even if we conform?"

"I see no reason why we shouldn't."

There was a moment's pause, then Nick said, "Oh, hell! I don't know. I'm just grabbing at straws. Just chattering."

Wava laid a hand on his arm. "I know it's hard—this waiting. There's a deck of cards over there. Would you like a game of gin?"

Nick got the deck. "Okay. But I can think of a lot of things I'd rather do."

"Possibly," Wava said primly, sitting down opposite him, "trying to make me would be more amusing."

He laid the deck down suddenly and raised startled eyes to hers. "Maybe it would," he said softly. "Maybe it would at that."

Later, a dead-pan Chinese cook soft-shoed in with dinner. He set it on the table and shuffled out without a word or a look.

And the mysterious submarine plunged on through the sea toward a rendezvous with the unknown.

ON THE following day, Wava Malloy entered the lounge cabin where Nick was pacing the floor. She snatched up a cigarette, lit it, and shook out the match with a nervous motion. "I heard something," she said.

Nick waited.

"I was passing the cabin forward, where the crew spends leisure time. Just as I went by, the door was opened from the inside and there were snatches of conversation I could hear."

"Anything that made sense?"

Wava sat down, drew her skirt over nylon-clad knees, and stared through a smoke cloud. "Yes—and no. There was something about the Big Bubble. Someone spoke inside and I caught the words: 'He's falling behind schedule. He'll really crack the whip when we get back to the Big Bubble.' Obviously, that must be the place we're going. Does it make any sense to you?"

Nick's eyes narrowed in concentration. "The Big Bubble. You're sure you got it straight?"

"Yes. It was repeated twice. Then the door closed and I didn't hear any more."

"It's not the name of any place I know."

"If we could only talk to someone," Wava said, crushing her cigarette into a tray. "If we could only ask a few questions of someone other than that mad monster!"

Nick glanced up at her suddenly.

"You thought of something?" she asked.

"Yes—yes, I have. There are some men I might be able to talk to, but

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whether they know any more than we do, is another thing." Nick got to his feet. "You wait here. I'll be back."

Nick went swiftly through the companionway to stand in front of the brass-studded door to Tanko Darnell's cabin. He knocked, and immediately a gruff voice bade him enter.

Tanko Darnell sat as before at the big desk, a black, fuming cigar in his mouth. "What is it?"

Nick dropped into a chair. "I'm getting bored."

"Sorry. I offered you the girl. If she doesn't suffice..."

"That sort of thing's not quite in my line—at least, not as a full-time sport. How long before we make port?"

"That I can't say exactly."

A pause, then Nick said, "A thought occurred to me. An idea you might okay."

"What is it?"

"That I start my duties immediately. Those men in the big after-cabin are some of your laborers—or am I wrong?"

"New ones I've just recruited."

"Then why shouldn't I assume my duties. Wouldn't you be interested in what they're saying—privately?"

TANKO DARNELL leaned back and considered this. Finally, he nodded, took a key from his drawer and tossed it toward Nick. "Go ahead. Return the key to me when you're through with it. You can have it any time. Get out now—I'm busy."

Nick complied. He stood for a few moments looking through the heavy heavy glass of the door before he used the key. Inside was a long, narrow cabin with bunks on either side upon which lounged some twenty men. A few of them returned his stare. Others glanced up only to look away again. The rest could not be bothered.

In one group were three men indelibly stamped as Italians. Two close to the door were of Slavic origin. The large, bullet-headed man sitting morosely alone, was undoubtedly a German.

With only a superficial once-over, Nick was forcibly struck by the fact that none of these men seemed of particularly low morale; not at all as he expected a group of shanghaied men to be. He unlocked the door and went inside.

He stood for a full minute, after he'd closed the door, listening to the various comments his entrance had generated.

One of the Slavs spoke to the other in Polish: "A good day's work would kill this one."

His companion snickered.

A loud whisper from one of the Italians: "A man instead of the girl. We never have any luck."

A grumble in Swedish: "Go back where you came from. Send the wench who comes to peek in."

Nick was engaged in something other than listening to comments. He'd wondered if by chance there was a microphone planted in this cabin. He studied the walls and ceiling carefully, and could see no signs of one. Frankly, he could see no reason why Darnell should plant a microphone in this cabin. The questioning of the men had been Nick's idea—not Darnell's.

Nick sat down on the bunk and turned to address the Poles. "How long have you been aboard?"

They looked at each other in silence, then the spokesman said, "Two weeks, three days."

"Did all of you come aboard at once?"

"No. We have been here longest. They came in twos and threes." The Pole pointed to the German. "He came alone."

The German looked over, scowled,

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but said nothing.

Nick was mystified. There was no resentment in these men against unjust treatment. "How did you sign on?" Nick asked. "What were the terms?"

This puzzled the Poles for a time. "We are not of the crew. We are passengers."

"Where are you bound?"

"We were hired for construction work."

THE SECOND Pole spoke up for the first time: "South America, friend. We go to a place in South America at good wages." He took a fat wallet from his pocket and slapped it with a gnarled hand. "A month's pay in advance. Good pay. Much money."

Nick turned toward the German, and the closest Pole laid a restraining hand on his arm to whisper: "I would not talk to him. It might be dangerous. He wants no friends."

And the other: "He says his name is Guttman, but I think he lies. He flees, I think, from the law."

Nick regarded the German who sat with his elbow on his heavy thighs and stared at the floor. But even this man's resentment, Nick felt, was directed at no particular person. Evidently he was there of his own free will. Evidently they all were.

He got up and left the cabin, locking the door behind him. As he handed the key back to Tanko Darnell, the latter smiled slightly with his eyes. "Did you hear any suspicious conversation—uncover a mutiny, perhaps?"

Nick flushed in spite of himself. This because Darnell's eyes held such complete understanding. "No. I heard nothing at all of importance."

"But you discovered the men came aboard of their own free will and were not shanghaied?"

"Yes," Nick snapped. He turned and left the cabin.

Back in the lounge, he told the waiting Wava Malloy, "We seem to be the only ones he used force on. That bunch back there are laborers. He evidently recruited them legally and without force."

"They don't object to being locked up?"

"Apparently not. It must have been part of the bargain."

"And certainly the crew isn't working under duress."

"It doesn't seem logical. I wonder if Darnell would give me the key to—"

Wava Malloy sat upright, suddenly tense, her eyes wide. She laid a hand on Nick's knee. He said, "What's the matter?"

"Can't you feel it? We've slowed down. We're hardly moving."

Nick concentrated for a moment, then said, "I'm not very good at sensing such things. I'll take your word for it."

"I felt it instantly." Her hand shifted to grasp his, and he felt the pressure of her strong fingers. "You can sense that, can't you?"

"What?"

"The tilt of the ship. We're pointing downward."

As she spoke, the increasing throb of the engines could be felt through the framework of the submarine; the vibration of motors creating added power, driving to increased effort.

"Look."

Nick followed the girl's eyes to see an ashtray sliding silently forward on the table. As they stared, the tray picked up speed to slide over the edge and spill ashes on the floor.

"We're going down," Wava whispered. "We're going down a lot faster than you realize."

Nick turned his entire attention to the girl. He put out his arm to encircle her shoulders and draw her close

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to him. "You're scared, aren't you?"

"You're darned right I am!"

"That makes two of us. I'm plenty scared myself."

His reward was a quick smile of gratitude and her acceptance of his embrace. Nothing more was said for several minutes, after which time Nick got up from the lounge and went downhill, forward, to get a pack of cigarettes. His return trip was a definite climb.

He grinned reassuringly. "Just like in the Alps," he said, and held out the pack of cigarettes.

Wava reached for them, then stopped, her hand held poised in mid-air. "We've leveled off."

The engines sang again, a smoother, more effortless song. Nick said, "Looks as though we went downstairs. Now we're driving ahead again."

"But slower. We're hardly moving."

Somewhere in the submarine, a bell sounded three times. The throb of the engines diminished to the faintest of vibrations. Then the door opened and a cold, impersonal face under an officer's cap appeared in the opening.

"This is it, you two. The Big Bubble."

LLANNI stood on the floor of her prison, under the waters, and watched the strange craft rise up out of the sea. As before when this had happened, the rising was preceded by great activity among the creatures of the place. A great scurrying to and fro as preparations were made, and the creatures that looked the same—the ones with identical skins of red and gray, that carried odd sticks and always walked in lines and precise patterns—took the initiative.

These creatures, seemingly obsessed with their own importance, marched with stern faces to the dock and lined up in precise order. They formed a barrier beyond which the other creatures were not allowed to go. The others waited in the rear, a silent crowd of them, with all eyes centered on the dock.

He is coming back, thought Llanni. The gods have sent him back to laugh at me and torment me. Will my punishment never end? Was my sin so great it can never be washed away? The galfin, sensing her misery, came close and nuzzled her arm with his cold nose. She pressed her face into his scaly neck and wept. She wanted, oh so much, to die!

Now the waters parted and the superstructure of the craft appeared above its surface. Gradually the whole of it came into view, and another group of creatures began using weird sticks and objects to make sounds in rhythm. This, Llanni had decided, was some form of welcome to the gross, ugly one who would soon step from the craft. She watched in dreadful fascination.

NICK, FOLLOWING close on the heels of Wava Malloy, walked down the gangplank and stood transfixed. He was incapable of speech, but the girl beside him breathed six words: "So this is the Big Bubble."

Then Nick voiced his amazement: "Great God! What is it? Where are we?"

Apparently, they stood upon the floor of a vast cavern. At first, Nick doubted this, not being able to encompass the realization nor accept in his mind the thought of a cave so vast. Yet, he had to accept this because the darkness far above was obviously not that of night time. The darkness was somewhere beyond the range of great neon tubes interlacing, crossing, and interlocking high overhead. The lights carried on into the distance in all directions.

As Nick and Wava stood staring, almost open mouthed, great numbers

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of busy men shoved and jostled about them. Off across a great expanse of water, there were many boats, scows, and rafts, coming and going about various businesses. Nick was giving his attention to the smart red and green uniformed columns of soldiers standing at attention when Wava grasped his arm.

"Good lord! Over there! Am I seeing things, or do you see it too?"

Before he had time to turn and look, Tanko Darnell strode down the gangplank, moved between them, and drew them at a smart pace toward the waiting column. He said, "Now you can see why I didn't tell you where we were bound. It would have been a waste of words trying to describe this, and you wouldn't have believed me anyhow. What do you think of my army?"

Wava was hauled along, but came with some reluctance as she stared back over her shoulder. Nick was now looking past the squadron of infantry toward what was evidently a city. The buildings were low and were hewn out of solid rock. They were set upon tiers, one above the other much after the fashion of the ancient Indian dwellings of the American Southwest.

Tanko Darnell had slanted off toward the right where a large building stood alone, apart from the city proper, and on top of which, a large golden dome glittered in the light of the overhead neons.

"That's my administration building," Tanko Darnell said. "You'll both be quartered there." Wava had been holding back somewhat, her attention still riveted upon something rearward. Darnell drew her firmly along toward a cemented area at the top of a stone stair flight. He spoke to Nick Holiday: "Well, what do you think of it?"

NICK GROPED for words. He stood gazing about him, seeking a reaction he could translate into the vocal. He said, "To me, this looks illegal. One hundred per cent beyond the law."

"You're wrong. Here, I am the law. Nothing is beyond me."

"Any objection in telling us exactly where we are?"

"Not at all. We are in the Atlantic Ocean, about half a mile below the surface of the Caribbean Sea. Not far from the Sea of Saragossa."

"I must have misunderstood you. I thought you said a half mile below the surface."

"I did. It will take a little time before you can accept that. In the meantime—do you remember a Herr Guttman? One of the laborers you interviewed?"

"I remember him."

"Then let's watch the unloading. Something of interest could happen."

Turning his attention toward the docked submarine, Nick saw that the twenty-odd laborers were in the process of coming ashore.

"A man like Guttman is useless to me—except as an example for the others. He's a rugged individualist, I think. Let's see if I'm right."

The men were coming down the ramp in single file, those in the lead holding the others back as they stopped to gape at their new surroundings.

"The point," Tanko Darnell said, "is to make them understand the situation right from the start. It's most important."

As the laborers hesitated, the commander of the red and gray squadron barked a command: "Get a move on, you stupid pigs! When I say march, I mean march!"

The men stared in wonder at the soldiers deployed in a double line at the mouth of the ramp; a grim red and gray gauntlet through which they must pass. The leaders hesitated, then

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moved forward in single file.

"Step along! Step along! Do you think I like standing here playing nursemaid to you louts?"

They were too bewildered to object or resist. They moved silently forward.

"There he is," Darnell said. "Watch him spit fire."

Nick threw a quick side-glance at the huge, bearded Darnell; noted his attention was riveted on the unloading ramp to the exclusion of all else. He saw the hot, eager light in Darnell's eyes; saw the eager, avid expression. Either this man was a sadist of the first order, or he enjoyed seeing his own authority enforced with brutality. There was no doubt in Nick's mind that brutality of some sort was the order of the moment.

He watched the big German stop midway down the ramp. Guttman straightened, threw back his head, and scowled.

"Get moving, you stupid bastard!" the commander yelled.

A snarl boiled from Guttman's throat at the words. He growled, "Mein Gott! Vas iss?" and swung his head in an arc like an outraged bull.

"Come down off that ramp!"

GUTTMAN came down off the ramp. He came like a charging water buffalo. Head down, fists doubled, he drove straight for the commander. But he never reached the man.

From somewhere, a rifle cracked sharply, three times. Guttman stopped, jerked, and wrapped his arms slowly across his huge belly as he doubled over. His head dropped and he pitched forward. He lay unmoving.

"Get that carrion out of here," the commander barked, and two soldiers came forward, picked up the inert Guttman and carried him away.

Wava Malloy was the first to find words. "Why—why they shot the poor man down in cold blood!" She reached out a hand and Nick's hand was there. He gripped her arm gently as she swayed. "I think I'm going to be...sick," she murmured.

"A little hardening will be good for you," Darnell said cheerfully. "That was done for a purpose. The purpose for which Guttman was brought here. I always say one stark example is worth years of more gentle persuasion."

"It was certainly stark enough," Nick said. He did not try to keep the contempt from his voice and, as he spoke, a part of his brain was busy with another facet of this weird affair: His own personal relationship to Darnell.

Darnell had given Nick the picture by having Langley shot down in the submarine. A grim warning not to step out of line. Now, here was another warning to the laborers. Nick realized his helplessness, but at the same time he could not resist testing Darnell—feeling his way with words as he went along.

It was a dangerous game; this he knew. Darnell would no doubt order Nick killed in the same manner if he even sensed rebellion. Therefore, even a tone of contempt in Nick's voice could signal his death.

Yet, Nick felt an odd inward exhilaration in prodding the bearded man with words and with tone of voice. "It seems to me," he said, "you could find a less violent pattern for your examples."

Nick kept his eyes off Darnell, but he could feel those of the latter boring into him. He could also feel the silence as almost a tangible thing.

"You're either a brave lad—or a fool," Darnell said softly. "Before long, I'll know which."

"You told me yourself you admired

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frankness. Did you mean that, or not? And it must be obvious to you that such brutality as this is horrifying to both of us. Would you prefer to wonder what we're thinking? Or would you rather be told?"

AFTER A moment, Darnell broke into a roar of explosive laughter. In all directions, eyes turned toward him. And the timing of the guffaws could give the men within hearing distance only one impression—he was laughing over the death of Guttman. Another pointed example for them to ponder.

But probably one of sheer chance, because Darnell's thoughts were elsewhere. "I take back the part about your being a fool. You're a clever young man. Your logic is sound. But," he added with a change of tone, "I'd recommend more caution. I'm not always in such a genial mood."

He went on now—with long strides—across the cemented area toward the building entrance. "Come with me. I'll show you your quarters."

The lobby of the building was vast and of shining white marble. It was deserted, but as they entered, two uniformed men came toward them from beyond a row of marble columns. Bent evidently upon business of their own, they saluted perfunctorily and went on, like two stiff-faced robots.

Darnell led the way up a wide staircase into a comparatively narrow hall flanked by white-paneled doors. At the head of the stairway were a pair of double doors, larger than the others.

"My quarters," Darnell said. "You'll report to me in there." Then he tilted back his head, made a megaphone of his hands, and yelled, "Matilda!"

Instantly, a door opened at the far end of the hall and a stoop-shouldered slattern came shuffling forward. Her face, in concert with every face Nick had so far seen in this place, was devoid of expression. Empty, vacant, like that of a zombie. Yet not entirely so, because the very emptiness of it, the vacancy, was an expression of hopelessness. She stopped and stood mute, waiting.

"Where were you?" Darnell growled. "What were you doing?"

The answering words were as empty and hopeless as the face. "I was watching the...execution...of the worker."

"You may remember this woman," Darnell said. "You may have seen her in the United States. She was an actress named Maddy Kane. A Broadway headliner. I brought her here with the idea of enjoying her talents, but she cracked up. Impossible to recognize now, isn't she?"

Even with what he'd gone through, even with what he'd learned of Darnell's callousness and cruelty, Nick Holiday was chilled anew. Revulsion ran through him at the manner in which Darnell spoke of the slattern; the way he looked at her. Like a man speaking of a spavined and useless horse—of a dumb animal past its period of service to its master.

"Matilda will show each of you your quarters," Darnell said. "I've got things to do."

The slattern turned without comment and went back as she had come, evidently taking it for granted that Nick and Wava would follow. This they did.

Then, Darnell's voice brought them to a halt. "Malloy. Report for work in my quarters at nine tomorrow morning. You, Holiday—drop in at eleven. I'll explain the entire setup here—show you around—and outline your duties."

Darnell went into his quarters and closed the door. As they continued

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on their way, Nick saw the white, taut look on the face of Wava Malloy. A feeling of warmth swept through him as she looked up, and he put a quick arm around her shoulders and drew her close. He got a smile of gratitude in return.

The slattern stopped and indicated a door. "This one's for you," she mouthed flatly, then pointed at the next one. "That room's for her."

Nick opened his door and then turned to Wava. "Come on in a minute," he said.

"I'll wait," the slattern said. "There might be something the lady wants."

Wava's misery found expression: "This awful, awful place! Nick—I'm scared! Where will all this end?"

He drew her inside and closed the door.

It was a neat, clean room, as modern as anything one could find in a city hotel. A crisp, candlewick spread over the single bed, a chest of drawers, a full-length mirror; carpeting from wall to wall and a door leading into a blue-tiled bathroom.

Only one inconsistency. There were no windows.

WAVA SAT down on the bed and dropped her face into cupped hands. Nick sat down beside her and drew her head against his shoulder. He said, "Take it easy, baby. Take it easy." And as Wava responded by slipping into his arms, it occurred to Nick that his words had really been of endearment; the first of such words he'd ever used in speaking to the extremely desirable Wava Malloy. He raised her face, saw the near-tears glistening in her eyes, and kissed her firmly and tenderly upon the lips. "Process of boy making girl," he said, grinning, and his easy cheerfulness brought an answering smile from Wava.

"I'm not as easy to make as you think," she said, and in her voice was a brave attempt at banter.

"Bet you ten bucks I score," Nick answered. Then he sobered and released the comforted Wava. He got up and stood with a frown of concentration on his face. "There's something I wanted to tell you," he said. "Something I've figured out—and I think I'm right."

"What is it?"

"About Darnell. He's as cruel as Satan and as mad as Svengali, but I don't think we're in too much danger."

Wava's silence indicated doubt.

"He's got himself and everyone else figured out to a hair's breadth, but there's one point in his own make-up he's overlooked. That's personal vanity. I can see it bubbling underneath his cast iron hide. He wants to show off; wants to point all this out to somebody and say, 'Look what I did.' And I think he's picked us. So we're safe—at least until we've been shown about the place."

"I hope you're right," Wava said.

"You go to your room and get some sleep now. I could use some myself."

Nick kissed her again and led her to the door. As he opened it, he saw the slattern waiting in the hall, like a weary horse at a hitching post. He closed the door, went back, and dropped across the bed. Maddy Kane. How well he remembered the name. Not too long ago it had been magic. He remembered seeing Maddy's "Peter Pan" at the Lyceum Theater at 42nd and Broadway. He recalled the delicacy, the charm, the utter fascination of her performance. On that stage, Maddy Kane had been childhood eternal.

Later, she had disappeared. There had been comments, rumors, but she had been past her peak at the time, and the world had not been greatly

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interested.

Nick shuddered at the mind-picture of the slattern in the hall. It was almost beyond belief.

Then, his mind drifted to other questions of more pressing interest. What was this place? Were Darnell's words—half a mile under the surface—to be taken literally? Nick looked forward to the morrow when he would be given answers to his questions. With this in mind, he drifted off into an uneasy sleep.

But sometime later, this sleep was broken by a gentle hand brushing his face. He opened his eyes. Wava was bending over him and there was suppressed excitement in the shining of her eyes.

She said, "Nick! Wake up! I've discovered something amazing!"

Nick came groggily to consciousness.

"What is it?" he asked.

LLANNI HAD begun to feel herself weakening. She tired much quicker now, and would lie for hours on the floor of her prison, looking out at the despised creatures around her and begging her gods to be merciful. She slept oftener, to dream of the white beaches and the gentle waters of Munesia; of the companions and the happiness she had known before that awful time when she had defied the gods and had gone through the Forbidden Place.

The gods had given her at least a brief respite in that the hated hairy one had not come to torment her since his arrival from under the waters in the strange craft. This time there had been a she-creature with him, together with another of his own kind. Llanni had been interested in the she-creature. But now, lying sick at heart in her prison, she wanted only to die. Tears welled up in her great eyes to mix with the waters in which she lay. But the gods continued to ignore her.

"ALL RIGHT," Nick said. "What have you discovered?"

Wava could hardly contain her excitement. Without answering, she took Nick's hand and led him to the door. She opened the door and looked up and down the hall. It was empty. "In my room," she said. "Be very quiet."

Nick followed her to the door beyond. She opened it and drew him inside. As she closed it behind them, Nick stood staring, a look of bewilderment on his face.

"Peter Pan" sat waiting on the edge of the bed. In the first flash of seeing, Nick remembered the Lyceum Theater of long ago. The woman seated on the bed wore no makeup. She was clad in the garments of a slattern. Her hair was stringy and unkempt, but the change in Maddy Kane was pure magic. Her face had grown young; her eyes were bright, deep, compelling; the slackness of mouth, the droop of body, were gone.

Nick stood, mouth agape, as he paid silent tribute to her shining genius. From what he had seen, he could say with assurance that Maddy Kane was the greatest actress of them all.

Maddy came forward, smiling. "Don't look so astounded," she said, while Nick thrilled to the rich timbre of her magnificent voice. "I'm not acting now. This is the real me. This is Maddy."

"Isn't she marvelous?" Wava breathed. Then, "Nick, there's an Underground here in this—this place, and Maddy's a part of it. It's pledged to the destruction of the Big Bubble. Maddy wants us to join."

Sudden suspicion welled up within Nick. Was this woman in league with Tanko Darnell? Was this a trick of the bearded man to test his new employees?

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Maddy Kane read the questions in his eyes. "You have no cause to fear me," she said. "I am not a tool of Darnell. In fact, it will be my duty to push a knife in his heart when the time comes."

"You took quite a chance—revealing the presence of an Underground to us. How do you know we aren't his creatures?"

"I was pretty sure of myself. I can read a great deal in people's eyes, and you two have had no experience with intrigue. You are both helpless to hide your true feelings. I saw the look of horror on Wava's face when she saw the huge woman trapped in the fish tank."

Nick turned to Wava. "What's she talking about?"

"It was something I saw—something you missed as we left the submarine. I didn't mention it because—well—I guess later I took it to be a hallucination—of some sort. A huge, naked woman at least twenty feet tall, in a big glass tank at the end of the harbor."

NICK FELT himself to be suddenly alone in a place of idiots and mad people. Even Wava had fallen under their spell. He turned dazed eyes on Maddy Kane. Again she entered the breech and her rich voice seemed something to cling to in the midst of a nightmare.

"There is such a creature, but you'll see her later. She isn't important now. There is so much else—"

"There's everything," Nick said. "We know nothing at all of this place. I'm not even sure I'm awake. It must be a hideous, everlasting dream."

Within Nick there was wonder; wonder at himself. Up to this point, he had taken things as they'd come—viewed them through sane eyes, and evidently for that reason they'd had about them an aura of sanity. Now, he realized this sanity had only been a reflection of himself. His defenses were tottering. "What is this place?" he demanded. "Darnell told us it's under the sea—that we're on the ocean floor. But Darnell is mad."

"Not in that sense. We are on the ocean floor. This is a man-made hell under the ocean, but I haven't time to tell you about it now. That must come later. At the moment, there's the Resistance—a place we must go where you will meet them." Maddy went to the door. With her hand on the knob, she turned. "Are you willing to risk your lives?"

Nick and Wava looked at each other. Nick shrugged. "It doesn't appear to me that much more jeopardy can be added." His eyes questioned those of Wava. She came to him and put her hand into his. "Lead on, Peter Pan," he said.

Maddy Kane raised startled eyes. Then she understood and flushed with pleasure. "You remember?" she said.

"Who could forget?"

"When I have time, I'm going to—to kiss you for that. Come."

She led them down the deserted hallway to a blank wall at the far end, against which was a bust on a wide-bottomed pedestal. With a quick look in both directions, she pushed the pedestal aside to reveal a dark opening in the floor. "Hurry," she whispered. "Follow me."

They went down a flight of steep stone stairs and Maddy whispered again, "Close the entrance after you." Nick drew the pedestal back to find it moved smoothly and without a sound.

Then on and on into darkness, guided only by the sure footsteps of Maddy Kane. Finally, a dim, flickering light beckoned from afar, grew larger and led them into a chamber

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where it scarcely dented the darkness.

Faint rustlings as from some shadowy presence greeted their entrance, and as Nick's eyes grew adjusted, he saw them—shadowy figures crouched in the protecting darkness beyond the flickering light. He heard Maddy's penetrating whisper, "Freedom or Death."

THIS WAS evidently the password, because immediately the shadows came forward and were men. Thin, beaten creatures, these, in rags and dirt and filth. They crowded close to the lights and Nick discovered what held them together—their basic excuse for being. It was in their eyes—the glimmering of valiant spirit—of courage within them—the fierce yearning for freedom that only death would destroy.

Maddy went to her knees among them, and Nick and Wava unconsciously did likewise. "These are men from the prisons," Maddy said. "Those who had courage to speak up and are being killed slowly by starvation, as examples to the rest. These are the ones who dared speak up in protest, but they are few—very few in comparison to the hundreds who slave for Darnell. They die quickly in these dark caves."

"But how are they prisoners?" Nick asked. "You found your way down here. Why can't they find their way out?"

"Bars are not needed here in the Big Bubble. There is no place to go. They would be shot on sight if they appeared above ground." Maddy sighed. "Several have committed suicide that way."

She spoke now to the shadows that were men: "Tell me what has happened since I came last night?"

A seemingly disembodied voice: "Tom Hall died. The guards took his body to the Burial Waters. We followed and found another there. One not dead. We brought him back."

The three visitors to darkness knew instantly who they would find. They followed their thin, wasted guides through the darkness to where a small wick sputtered in a hollow of grease. Its feeble rays outlined the huge form of Guttman. He lay with closed eyes, breathing heavily. Filthy rags had been laid over his wounds—wounds from which blood still oozed.

"He was thrown in the Burial Waters," a thin voice said, "but he fought to the surface and we rescued him."

Guttman's eyes opened and Nick was astounded at the endurance of the man. Torn to pieces inside, flung into the water for dead, he still lived. He turned his head to see them and in his eyes, too, there was the mark of the valiant; the spirit of the unconquerable.

"I will live," he grated, deep in his tortured chest. "Gott in Himmel! All the devils in hell can not kill me until I have wrung the life from that monster's neck." He sank down again, closing his eyes. "I will live," he muttered. Then he was still, save for the rasping of breath in his chest.

Maddy shook his head sadly. "Let him sleep," she said. "Let him rest."

THEY RETURNED to the larger light, and Maddy Kane said, "This is not the prison, but a place where we all meet to plan The Day. There are ways of getting out of the cells. When we leave, these men will return to them."

"What do you mean by The Day?" Wava asked.

"That blessed time when we strike. It is a slow and discouraging business, building for The Day. Some of us will not be here to see it. Others will have taken their places. But we work. We persevere. It will come."

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Maddy raised her voice slightly, so all could hear. "And you who suffer," she said. "To you I bring good news. These two who came with me are on our side. They have joined the Resistance, and they have places close to the fiend Darnell. They will bring The Day closer—the deliverance."

"But wait," Nick cut in, frowning. "This seems a hopeless cause. You yourself told me there is no way out. Therefore, you can't escape. And what good is any plan not built around escape?"

"No escape," Maddy said, "but we only ask to die fighting; to give our lives that the world may not be annihilated. There are things you do not know—things you will discover soon. You will learn the world is in great danger from this Darnell. We ask only to destroy his cesspool under the sea. For that privilege, we will gladly die."

There was silence, after which Maddy said, "I asked you if you were willing to risk your lives. I should have been more frank. The question is, are you willing to give your lives? There is no other alternative."

"Of course," Wava breathed.

But Nick was not so eager. "Not so fast," he said. "As you told us, there is much we must learn. I don't believe in diving blindly into anything. At the moment, I make only one promise. We will not betray you."

"We can ask no more," Maddy said. "And now we must leave. It is dangerous to stay here too long." She came gracefully to her feet, and there was warmth and love in her voice as she said, "Goodbye, my friends. Be of strong heart. Do not let your faith waver. We will return tomorrow night."

They went out as they had come, back through the trap door covered by the pedestal. As they approached their rooms, heavy footsteps could be heard from beyond the bend in the hall.

"Quickly," Maddy whispered. "Into Wava's room—both of you. The guards have begun patrolling the halls. You must stay there until morning."

SHE PUSHED the both of them inside and closed the door. But Nick opened it just slightly and peered forth. He saw a pair of smartly uniformed guards round the bend of the hall and march to its end. There they turned and retraced their steps. The hallway was evidently their beat.

But to this, Nick paid no attention. His interest was rooted in the miserable slattern who stood watching the guards through dull, lackluster eyes; the pitiful, beaten thing of broken spirit to which the guards paid no attention whatever.

Nick closed the door. "What a woman," he breathed. "What a woman!"

He turned to find Wava regarding him silently. "Maddy said we should stay in here...together," she said with some uncertainty.

Nick crossed the room and stood close, looking down at her. "Are you afraid?"

"N-no. No. Of course not."

"Do you think we should question Maddy's judgement? I could walk out into the hall and go to my own room. I don't think they'd stop me."

"But she must have had a reason."

"No doubt she did."

Her feminine reserve, her natural shyness, wavered and broke. She extended both arms. "Oh, Nick! I'm so miserable, so frightened. So tired."

He took her into his arms, gently, and her face was buried in his chest. She raised her head to look shyly up into his eyes. "And I think," she murmured as she blushed, "that I'm in love."

He held her thus for a long time. Then, he carried her to the bed. When

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she was asleep, he got up and paced restlessly back and forth across the room. Questions, conundrums, surmises unacceptable in the light of sane reasoning. "Tomorrow at eleven," he muttered. "Tomorrow at eleven, I should find out."

AT ELEVEN the next day, Nick walked into the quarters of Tanko Darnell. He found a large, luxurious reception room. It was as fine as anything he'd ever seen, but his attention went straight to the huge desk behind which sat a girl—the girl with whom he was in love.

Wava looked up and blushed as he entered. She dropped her eyes in confusion and raised them only when he said, "Morning, angel. I see you've taken up your new duties."

"Only a part of them. I'm transposing some notes for him and typing them."

"Anything of interest?"

"Not so far. Only dull statistics. He's waiting for you."

Wava indicated an inner door and watched Nick cross the room. As he disappeared from view, she threw him a kiss and the blush came again to her face.

Nick found Tanko Darnell seated at a desk much smaller than the one in the reception room. In fact, his entire office was more simply furnished than the one through which a visitor entered. Spartanlike in comparison.

Tanko waved him into a chair and took a thick black cigar from a box on his desk. "I've been waiting for you," Tanko said. "Did you sleep well?"

Nick said that he had.

"Then we'll get right down to business," Tanko said. He reached behind him and got a large roll of paper from its resting place against the wall.

"What sort of business?"

"You've got a lot of questions. I'm now prepared to answer them."

"That will be gratifying indeed."

"You'll make a personal inspection of the Big Bubble, of course, but we'll start out with this map. It will give you an over-all picture. And I'll tell you the story of the place."

TANKO IGNORED the map he'd spread on the desk and sat back in his chair. His eyes narrowed as though in retrospect. "This place," he said, "is a phenomenon produced by some ancient upheaval of the land and waters hereabouts. I'm inclined to think it dates back to when the fabled continents of Mu and Atlantis disappeared under the waves. Somehow, in the catastrophe, a certain amount of atmosphere was trapped in this cave on the ocean floor. Just how the atmosphere was held and prevented from rising to the surface, we can't be sure. It seems to have been caused by a perfect balance between the air trapped beneath the dome of this huge cave, and the pressure of the water in a narrow tunneled inlet to the west."

Darnell turned to favor Nick with a level, inscrutable gaze. "I discovered it when I was a comparatively young man, some thirty years ago."

While Nick was trying to estimate Darnell's age from that clue, the latter went on: "I'd bought a submarine and was engaged in salvage work in and around the Sea of Sargossa. Much treasure lies in that tangled graveyard of ships—there for the taking by any adventurous mariner. I filled that role to perfection, and even now my men are sometimes paid in ancient gold coins."

Nick was tempted to ask why Darnell bothered to pay slaves. He smothered the temptation but, as before, Darnell seemed to fathom the workings of his mind and said, "Only cer-

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tain of my men, of course. Most of it is slave labor that works, dies, and is replenished from the continents. But a certain number must be maintained in loyalty. Nothing buys loyalty like yellow gold."

"Even if the men have no means of spending it?"

"There is something else. They are looking forward to The Day. The time when they will be among the chosen few who live off the fat of the world."

It entered Nick's mind that two different factions in the Big Bubble were looking forward to two entirely different Days. However, he kept to himself any observations.

"But to get back to my story," Darnell said, "I went down in the diving bell on that morning some thirty years ago on strictly an exploratory trip. We were somewhat off the Sea of Sargossa, and I wanted to find out what lay on the ocean floor. I discovered this place by pure chance, but I was instantly alive to the possibilities that lay therein."

Darnell leaned back. Puffing his cigar, he stared at the ceiling. Then, the natural vitality of the man brought him to his feet and he paced swiftly back and forth across the room. He waved his cigar and said, "Imagine it, if you can! The first sensations I experienced. To go up a slanting tunnel of water and step out onto a sand beach and find breathable atmosphere on the floor of the ocean."

Nick felt called upon for comment. "Probably the only place of its kind to be found anywhere."

DARNELL jabbed an emphatic cigar in Nick's direction. "On the contrary. I'm led to believe there are many such places here under the ocean. If one, why not a dozen, or a hundred? I've never found another one, but I think there are little worlds of this sort down here where life never stopped. Where existences of a sort have been maintained since Atlantis and Mu were destroyed."

"But you've never found one?"

"No. But more about that later. I want to tell you now about this one. As I say, my reactions were instantaneous. Here was a chance for unheard of triumphs, and the basis of these had to be secrecy from the world above. I returned to my submarine and began looking over my crew with new analysis. Which ones could be trusted? Which ones would fit into my scheme? I selected certain ones—killed the rest—and took possession of this place that I christened The Big Bubble."

Nick's sensibilities writhed within him at the stark, hideous picture of this man; at the cold cruelty revealed by his words. With studied effort, Nick masked his true feelings behind an expression of bright interest.

"The place was a great deal different then," Darnell went on. "Much smaller than it is now. Thirty years of intensive work have wrought a great change. I'll skip over many of the details of as perfect and clever a plan as was ever put into operation. The years of work—the procurement of materials and manpower—the tremendous fight against great odds. I'll skip all that and come to the present. What have I here today? A beehive of industry. Captive scientists creating tools of death under constant and armed guard. A hydrogen-bomb in the making. A bomb with which I will—by indirection—bring the world to its knees before my pygmy empire!"

Darnell had been working himself up to a pitch of emotion. He hurled forth the last words and stood like a Caesar contemplating conquered worlds. "I—Tanko Darnell—will do this," he breathed.

The pause was pregnant. Then,

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Nick's dry voice was like a damper upon the ecstatic pitch of the atmosphere: "You said by indirection. Could you clarify that a little?"

Darnell, apparently tired from his efforts, came around the desk and dropped into his chair. "Certainly. At this moment, the world is divided into two camps—each armed to the teeth—each waiting to hurl death and destruction at the other."

"You expect to gain by a world war?"

"I expect to win the earth by causing it to commit suicide."

"It looks to me as though it will do that without help from you."

DARNELL shook his head. "On the contrary, there will be no war unless it is helped along by an outside agency. Neither side wants war. The ultimate result is too well known. They are bending over backwards to see that no untoward incident occurs; each is doubly careful not to provoke the other into war. Before long, faces will be saved on both sides and peace-fever will sweep the world. The East and the West yearn for an excuse to destroy their hydrogen bombs."

"That's very good news."

"The very worst news. The war must take place."

"You plan to arrange it?"

"I plan to start it. In less than a month from this day, a submarine will hurl a hydrogen bomb into the heart of New York City. The war will be on as of that moment."

"Your submarine? Your bomb?"

"Of course."

Nick leaned forward in his chair. "Tell me—just what do you expect to gain? Just how will the leveling of civilization help you?"

"When this war is over," Darnell said, "I will be supreme ruler of the last functioning community on earth—or rather in the earth. All else will be chaos. Only here will civilization continue to function."

Nick could have debated the word "civilization" as applied to the Big Bubble, but he did not. "But that," he said, "surely isn't the reason you want the world destroyed—just so you can make some sort of futile record. There's more to it than that."

"Certainly. You see, I've gone about as far as I can here, without vastly expanded tools and facilities. My progress has been slow because of the need of secrecy. Once known, I'd be gobbled up here as an advance base of some world power. The Big Bubble would be commandeered over night. But I am determined to go ahead; to continue the expansion of this underwater bastion. So far, in thirty years, I've managed to dig out and reclaim only about two square miles of territory. It has been bitter, frustrating work, and I've come to the point where I need larger machines, more manpower. And I'm tired of stealing and hijacking machinery, procuring it bit by bit through stealth and intrigue. I'm tired of weighing each man I acquire as to his loyalty, and how I can make him fit in. I'm sick of having to kill, kill, kill, in order to protect my secret."

IN OTHER words, Nick thought, you're pretty much like the early racketeers. You carved a place for yourself by murder, thievery, and every crime on the books. Now, you want to rise above all that; to be acclaimed as a great man; to be respected for your abilities.

But Nick thought it wiser to keep the observations to himself. Darnell was rambling on: "A prostrated world will lack strength," he said. "After the coming conflict, it will lie helpless on its back. Then, I can rise out of the sea and take what I need. I can use the strength I've built here to

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create a new world above. The possibilities are unlimited so long as the surface world is too weak to oppose me."

It was gigantic, long-range thinking, and Nick found himself impressed with this man's genius, even while loathing him. "Why," he said, tapping nervous fingers against the arm of his chair, "are you taking valuable time to tell me all this? And another thing: I've been wondering about the duties Wava and I are to undertake here in the Big Bubble. If you've been here thirty years, you've no doubt had use for a bookkeeper-typist and an interpreter before."

"I had both," Darnell said. "They had to be executed."

Nick had a sudden urge to change the subject. "Something you said a little while back about other places such as this under the ocean. Places that support life. Do you have any proof of this?"

Darnell's mood changed. He leaned back in his chair and burst out with a guffaw of explosive laughter. "I certainly do have proof," he said. "Wait until you see her."

He got up from his chair and started toward a door in the far wall of his office—opposite the one leading into the reception room. "Come with me," he said.

Nick found himself traversing a long, narrow hallway—evidently a private entrance Darnell was in the habit of using. "Only a few people know of the exit," Darnell said.

That caused Nick to remember that his first question had not been answered, and he lost no time in recalling the fact to Darnell.

"Why am I taking time to tell you all this?" For the first time, Darnell seemed uncertain, at a loss for words. Then he said, "Maybe because I'm lonely, son, and I've taken a liking to you. Or maybe because I see greater possibilities for you than I first saw. Crown Prince of the Big Bubble. How would that strike you, Nick?"

It was a matter of personal satisfaction to Nick that he'd figured this mad man so accurately. Lonely—frustrated—with no one to listen to his boasts—no one to realize what a smart man he was. But Nick felt he had never in his life received such a repulsive offer. He laughed lightly, seeking to evade the issue.

HE WAS NOT called upon for a reply, however. At that moment, Darnell opened a door leading out into a sort of pavillion. It was a private entrance to one side of what appeared to be a huge fishbowl—a great glass container fifty feet high, filled almost to the top with water. There was a small opening about two feet square on the top. A portion of the tank was visible from the submarine dock, but this side was hedged off by stone walls. And within it was a huge woman at least twenty feet high. A woman of such size and transcending beauty that Nick was stunned into speechlessness.

There was almost too much of wonder in that tank for the eyes to encompass. The woman lay quiet at the bottom of the tank, her great, lovely face glued to the glass side as though the luminous eyes saw something unattainable beyond the transparent barrier.

And nudging at the woman's hand, was the ugly muzzle of a beast out of someone's nightmare! Nick had seen the tiny animals in domestic fishtanks referred to as sea horses. Tiny, freakish little things resembling nothing so much as grotesque, misshapen horses. In fact, he recalled, that was what they were called. Sea horses.

This creature was their counterpart, multiplied in size so many times

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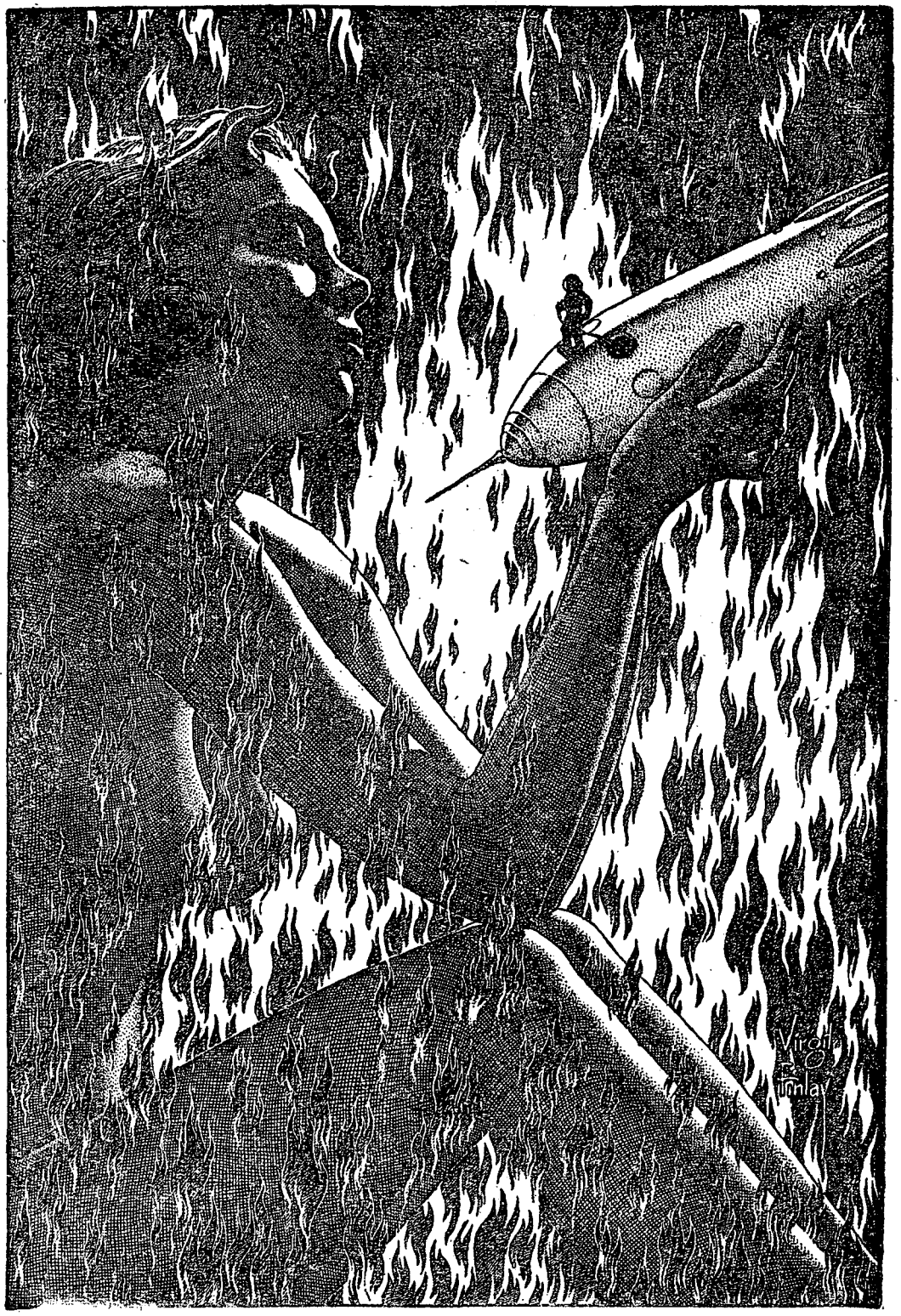

To the bewildered and miserable Llanni, this creature seemed somehow different—not a tormentor

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as to make even the huge woman look small. It was green and appeared to have the same sort of hide as an alligator. But its coloring was brilliant —a topaz hue.

The woman, it seemed, cast a strange spell over Darnell. He threw back his head and roared with laughter at sight of her. Finally, he turned to Nick and said, "Well, what have you got to say about that pair?"

Nick could find no words as he stared into the eyes of the hauntingly beautiful mermaid. She was entirely unclothed except for the protection given her by the long, blonde hair that floated like gossamer in the water. She reminded him of some breath-taking masterpiece done by a genius in sculpture; a genius able to work with flesh and blood; able to breathe life into his beautiful creations.

Finally he found words: "Great God in heaven! I'm having hallucinations. I'm not really seeing this. It's —it's impossible."

Darnell laughed again. "She's real all right. But what is she? That's the question. See the webbed feet? See the tiny horns on the forehead? In all other respects, she looks like a human female."

"But damn it all! She is a woman. A huge giantess!"

DARNELL shook his head. "No. She's definitely a fish. And living proof that there is some foundation of truth in all legends. You've seen pictures of mermaids, of course. Well, there you see a real one. Sometime, back in the course of history, one of her sisters reached the surface of the sea. She was spotted by some sailing man who carried her description into port. But no one believed him, of course, so the legend was born."

Nick was slowly recovering from his amazement. "How do you account for the fact that she looks human?"

Before he answered, Darnell's eyes went hazy with thought. "The sea is an ancient and mysterious mother," he said. "She is capable of weird and wonderful processes relative to evolution. You've seen some of the wonders of the deep in your aquariums and museums. But the sea guards her deeper secrets well."

"She certainly does," Nick agreed fervently.

"I've no doubt that this specie, whatever it is, started as human—probably the men and women of Mu or Atlantis buried suddenly beneath the waves and left with no air to breathe. Life, my boy, is a tenacious thing. It fights hard for existence, and nature is ingenious in preserving it. I'm convinced that nature, faced with the problem of fostering life in humans buried beneath the sea, evolved them into fish, or gave them enough characteristics of the fish to allow them to live in their new environment."

"But the time element, man! Evolution is a process of thousands of years!"

Darnell shrugged. "Who knows the age of the line from which she sprang? Who knows how many eons back her ancestors lost the ability to think and became as fishes?"

"How do you know she can't think?"

"It's obvious. She has no method of communication. I doubt if she even has vocal cords. She hasn't uttered a sound since I captured her out beyond the entrance to the Big Bubble."

"Amazing is a feeble word to describe that creature."

Darnell laughed again. "Not very important, really. Just one of the many freaks one finds in the ocean's depths. But I'd certainly like to capture a male." The man's eyes sparkled. "A male to put into the tank

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to mate with her. Gad! That would be a sight to see!"

Nick turned away in disgust, hiding his revulsion from Tanko Darnell. And evidently the latter did not see it because he said, cheerfully, "I can't give you any more time today, but the place is yours. Go where you like. Get acclimated to the place. In a few days, we'll talk further."

Darnell turned to leave, but Nick appeared rooted to the spot on which he stood. Darnell laughed jovially, and said, "Stick around and look her over. You'll never again see so much woman in one piece."

NICK WAS not aware of his departure. The youth's eyes were still staring into those of the unhappy creature in the tank. I'll bet my bottom dollar she can think, he told himself. There's a brain in that head. I've never seen such misery in a pair of eyes. Any living thing that can feel such misery, can think! I'll bet she can talk, too. And I'm going to find out. If I can get hold of a ladder, maybe I can lure her to the surface....

But at the moment, there was something more important to be done. He went off the private porch and into the street beyond. There, he went into the administration building through the front door.

Evidently, he had been officially given the run of the Big Bubble, because none of the stiff-faced guards challenged him. He went into the reception room of Darnell's office and walked up to Wava's desk.

"I've been worried about you," she said by way of greeting.

"Don't worry any more," he replied. "I'm royalty now. I'm Crown Prince of this joint. And by the way —I saw the woman in the tank."

"I thought you'd get around to that," Wava replied with slight resentment. "I don't suppose they put clothes on her yet?"

"Stop talking like a female," Nick said. "I came to ask you about Maddy. Her proposition. I'm for it."

"I was never against it."

"That's all I wanted to find out—that you hadn't changed your mind."

He went out and patrolled the halls of the vast building until he found a slattern dispiritedly dusting a marble column. The woman looked at him through dead eyes.

"I've come to tell you to count me in—and I speak for Wava, too. We're just a pair of shadows from now on." He grinned at Maddy. "Just call me Valiant," he said, and went on his way, whistling softly.

LLANNI WAS puzzled, but—though she did not realize it—her misery had been somewhat abated. It was the slim little he creature with the light hair. He had come to gaze upon her the first time, in company with the despised one. At first, Llanni took him to be the same—a tormentor.

But he was different somehow. The laughter and ridicule she had known here was not in him. Nor the strange, hot gaze of the others that made her feel so unclean. He had stood there looking into her eyes and she had sensed friendliness and pity; sensed it and rejected it. Then he'd gone away and she'd forgotten him except as just another of the hated ones.

But he had returned with a contrivance he had used to climb to the top of her prison and perch up there on the nothingness like a bug in still water. He did nothing. He merely sat there as though waiting for something. But Llanni was aware of his presence and sat on the bottom of the prison looking up at him.

Suddenly, Llanni, acting without

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thought, did an unaccountable thing. She flung herself smoothly up through the water. The rush brought her almost to the surface—almost within reach of the he creature. But he did not move, and as she arced and flashed by under him, he made an inviting motion with his hand. Halfway back to the bottom, Llanni hung in mid-water, regarding him. He motioned again and pointed to his lips. Then he sat and waited.

Llanni was not good at computing time. It passed and was forgotten. So she never knew how long it was before she was near the he creature, her head and bust above the water, there in the corner of the prison. She could have killed him so easily. She could have reached out, taken him in her hand, and squashed him like a sea-crawler. She almost made the motion; then drew her hand back and waited. The he creature was making strange sounds, rubbing his chin thoughtfully and regarding her with kindly, though puzzled eyes.

And she too was puzzled. Did he want to be a friend? Then why did he not free her from her prison? Was he possibly not powerful enough? Was he too afraid of the despised one? In this thought, she unconsciously found a basis of mutual sympathy.

Finally, the he creature climbed down his contrivance and went away. But he came back the next day and the next day—and the next.

NICK DIDN'T stiffen perceptibly. watched Nick pace the floor of his room. Her eyes were cloudy with resentment. "I don't understand you, Nick. With things coming to a head around here—with the Underground armed and ready to take the place over—you spend all your time thinking about that—that freak of a woman out in her tank!"

Nick turned to look at the girl. "The Underground hasn't a chance in the world of taking this fort over. They're whistling in the dark."

Wava stared at him wide-eyed. "Why, it's all planned!"

"Sure it's all planned, but all of us are going to die just the same."

"Then why—why on earth are you—and I—going along with the plan?"

He grinned. "Honey, you were all hopped up about it that night down in the caverns. Ready to sacrifice your life for the cause of right and justice. Ready to save the world from destruction by giving your own life like a martyr. What brought about the change?"

"It's—well, after all, Nick, I've had time to think. It isn't so bad here, really. I'm willing to join the cause if it's sure to succeed, but—"

"Not if it isn't?"

She doubled her fists in anger. Tears came close to the surface. "Oh—you. I just can't understand you. Are you so stupid as to be willing to throw your life away—"

He stood before her, looking down at her through serious eyes. "You want to play the winning side, honey, and sometimes it's hard to do—hard to know which way to jump soon enough. Sure, I'm going through with it, because it's the right thing to do. None of us will come out alive, but there's a good chance none of the others will, either. Thus, the world will be saved from a war that will destroy civilization."

"Big words! They've been saying that for centuries! The next war will send us back to the caveman days. But we have no proof! We aren't even sure Darnell will succeed in starting a war by throwing his bomb on New York."

"We are sure he's going to try, and that ought to be enough." He sat down beside her and took her hand in his. "I'm not trying to sound like a big,

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brave man, honey. But the bomb is loaded on the sub. Darnell is ready to go, and I think we should try and do something to stop him. And as for being brave, I'm scared stiff."

"You'd—you'd sacrifice me—"

"You put me in a tough spot. There just isn't much I can do. In the first place, you're here right in the middle of it. Regardless of which side you're on, you'll probably be killed. And I can't do anything about it, honey—not a thing."

"You could put our love first—talk to Darnell—tell him what's going on—"

NICK DIDN'T stiffen perceptibly. It was from within. Something looking out through his eyes that made Wava hesitate and turn silent.

"I couldn't do that, honey. Neither could you."

"I'm not sure. I'm not sure of anything."

He stood looking down at her, and there was a long minute of silence. Then, in a sudden burst of hysteria, Wava jumped to her feet, dodged around him and ran out of the room. A moment later, he heard her door slam.

He paced the floor for another half hour, deep in troubled thought. What could a man do? Even sure of his loyalties, he was still faced with problems which seemed unanswerable. And a task he knew he could not bring himself to perform.

Finally he, too, quitted the room and wandered through the halls until he found Maddy Kane on her hands and knees, scrubbing the marble floor. He said, "Get a call out for tonight. Things must be pushed up forty-eight hours. Something's happened that makes it necessary to move fast."

Maddy went on with her scrubbing as though she hadn't heard, and Nick went and found his way into the passage leading to Darnell's private porch facing Llanni's prison.

Llanni. He knew now that it was her name. She had told him. He was rather proud of the job he'd done on Llanni. Starting from scratch—with nothing but his instincts as a born linguist—he'd gone to work. Hour after hour of patient work—first to break down her fear and suspicion—then to bring out that first strange sound—the word in a strange and alien tongue that proved she could talk.

After that, the sessions of pure, abstract pleasure in coaching, urging, interpreting and learning until he could speak as she spoke; could understand her and ask questions about Llanni and her origin.

And still there was so much to learn. So much of interest to be drawn from the deep-sea creature with the body of a huge female, and the mind of a child.

There was no personal feeling within him toward Llanni. This was proven by the fact he had never once debated in his own mind the existence of such feeling. There was friendliness, pity, and a keen interest in the contact he'd established.

AS TO THE coming upheaval in the Big Bubble, his attitude was strangely lethargic. So much so, that he'd questioned and analyzed it; wondered why he was not excited and filled with tension as to coming events.

But he regarded it merely as something that had to be done. He looked forward to it with distinct regret, but never with the thought of flinching or dodging.

He hurried now to set the ladder in place against the great glass tank. He climbed to the top and Llanni was waiting for him there.

She smiled, put out a great hand and

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brushed it gently across his hair. She laughed. The laugh was amazingly low and musical for her size.

"You were telling me, last time, about Munesia," Nick reminded.

"There is little I have not told you. A wonderful place, warm and bright with color. What else would you know of it?"

"What sort of leadership—what kind of government—did you have in Munesia?"

"Government?"

"Yes. Who told you what to do?"

"The gods."

"Of course, but who represented the gods? Through whom did they speak to you?"

Llanni considered this carefully. "No one spoke for the gods. When each Munan was made—from the slime of the waters in the shoals—when each was very small—they knew what the gods decreed; that none should go through the Forbidden Place; that Munesia was sufficient for all Munans. But I defied the gods and went through the—"

"Yes—yes, Llanni. I know. But about these shoals. Was a shoal your home when you were very young? Were you there with your mother and father?"

This mystified her greatly. "Father? Mother? I do not understand these things. There were only the gods."

"Okay—we'll skip that for a moment." He leaned forward and laid a hand on her great cheek, marvelling at the cold, yet wondrously soft texture. "Llanni, in the land I come from, we have what are known as salmon—"

"Is that your land and water? Salmonesia?"

"No—no. Well, not exactly. But we have these salmon, and at a certain time each year they go up from the water into the land for no other reason than knowing they must. No one tells them to except their gods—"

"Are the salmon like me, Nicholas Holiday?"

"I'm not sure. That's what I'm trying to find out. I want to discover whether or not you live entirely by instinct as do the salmon. Llanni—is there anything the Munans do at certain times because the gods have told them to?"

SHE LAUGHED, happily, and it was like the laughter of a child. "Oh, yes. There is something Munans do," and she turned dreamy at the thought of it. "You must mean the joining. At certain times, the hes and the shes go to the Deep Place. It is a place of ecstasy for all Munans. Then the hes leave and the shes go to the shoals where they sleep for a long time. I have slept twice in the shoals."

Nick straightened and drew a deep breath. It was amazing what you could learn if you asked enough questions. But there was so much more to be discovered—and so little time. Nick felt doubly resentful that the press of mundane affairs should be allowed to interfere with this truly important and interesting pursuit of strange knowledge.

"Llanni. Have you any idea where you came from originally?"

"I—why from the shoals, of course."

"No—I mean long before that—where the first he and she Munan came from? They were not always in Munesia, were they?"

"Oh, yes. That is—ever since the gods came and made Munesia. The gods came there long ago and pushed the angry waters back beyond the Forbidden Place. They did many things because Munans are the chosen of the gods and are loved by them. The gods put the roots into

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the warm waters from which all the food comes endlessly. The gods were very good to the Munans."

"I'm sure they were. And how big were these gods?"

"How big?"

"Yes. Were they as big as you? Or smaller, like me?"

Llanni frowned. That one seemed most puzzling. "I never thought before, but they were smaller, I think. Much smaller than I am. But as small as you? I don't know."

DARNELL'S theory could be right, Nick thought. Llanni's origin could date from the sinking of the continents. But there was a confusing point. Legend had Atlantis sinking in this area or somewhat further east. Mu was reputed to have been far over in the Pacific. Yet, the name of Llanni's native place was Munesia. Strange.

Nick frowned. That confusion alone was worthy of patient investigation. But other matters pressed close, leaving no time. That's what's wrong with the world, Nick told himself with anger. No time for the really important things.

"Llanni," he said, "I must go now. And this time I probably won't be back. We may never talk again."

She looked at him quietly. "Are you a god?" she asked.

"What makes you think so?"

"I don't know. Maybe because you say things—because you speak of what must be with such certainty. All the things the gods say are for certain."

"No, I am not a god. I have no powers and I am quite helpless. But now I am going to speak for the gods. You must listen and do as I say."

"I will do as you say."

"Some time in the very near future, Llanni, you will be free of this place. I have arranged that a time will come when the wall of your prison will fade away and be as nothing. Do you remember how you were brought to this place?"

"I remember. Through the place under the waters."

"When your prison wall goes to pieces with a great noise, don't be afraid. Just take your galfin and go straight from here to the place under the water. Then go away. Go back to Munesia."

She was trembling and her great eyes were wide. "You mean the gods have said my punishment is over? There will not be death?"

"There will be no death for you if you go quickly. The gods have decided you can return to Munesia."

"I am very glad."

"Goodbye now. I must go."

He climbed down the ladder and she sank into the water, staying on a level with him until he reached the porch.

After Nick was out of sight, Llanni lay for a long time on the bottom of her prison pool. She thanked the gods for their favor. Then she wondered about Nicholas Holiday. He must be a god, she decided. No one ever spoke for the gods.

They spoke for themselves.

NICK CAME upon Maddy in the midst of her endless dusting. She had evidently been waiting for him, because she said, "A meeting has been called. They are waiting."

Nick frowned. "That's foolish! A meeting in the daytime could wreck everything!"

Maddy's eyes were cold. "There are greater dangers. Come!"

He followed her to the pedestal. Then, she suddenly dropped to her knees and began dusting it as footsteps sounded.

Nick walked on slowly, head bent

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as though in thought. The smartly uniformed guard came abreast of him and moved on. Nick continued walking until the guard disappeared around a corner. Then, he went back to Maddy.

Swiftly, they moved the pedestal, vanished beneath the floor and closed it after them. Below, Nick led the way. He had been down here many times, now, and the way was familiar; as familiar as the silent shadows crouching in the dim light.

"Here he is," Maddy said. "I had to wait a long time before he came by."

The huge form of Guttman crouched close to the light. The others lurked in the background. Guttman was scowling.

"How are the wounds, today?" Nick asked. "Are you sure you're physically fit to tackle this thing?"

"Never mind about me," the German growled. "At least I don't spend my time mooning over a fish!"

"Very clumsily brought out," Nick snapped. "What's wanted of me?"

"We got your message about pushing things up forty-eight hours."

"Right. As I said, something new has come up."

"We know what it is," Guttman growled. "We have eyes."

Maddy pushed forward: "You are taking the wrong attitude, Guttman. Nick isn't to blame if the girl got cold feet. It wasn't his fault. After all, didn't he warn us? He is still loyal."

"That isn't enough," Guttman replied. "Our lives are at stake. We must have more than loyalty."

"How did you know it was Wava?" Nick asked.

"We have eyes. I have watched her. She has been wavering for a long time. I expected this earlier."

NICK REGARDED the big German who, by sheer personal power, on the strength of naked hatred for Darnell, had taken the ball away from Maddy. He was the driving force behind the Resistance now, and neither Maddy nor Nick objected. The man was capable and powerful—both mentally and physically. Only a superman could have recovered, as Guttman had, from almost certain death.

"We must have more," Guttman said. "You have a duty to perform, Herr Nicholas."

"What duty?"

"It concerns the traitor—Fraulein Wava. She must be silenced before she weakens to the point of revealing our plans to Darnell."

"Silenced? What do you want me to do?"

"What must be done. Kill her. Carry out just execution."

Nick stood for some moments in silence. He'd known this was coming. It was the natural thing for them to demand of him. Yet, he'd veered away from the thought—refused even to let it stay in his mind. Now, it must be faced.

"That's impossible," he said.

"Why impossible? I have thought of a plan—a means of doing it—so no suspicion will fall upon you."

"Don't bother outlining it. Your plan doesn't interest me."

Guttman scowled. The shadows, playing on his broad face, made him look like a vengeful devil out of hell. "What do you mean?"

"That I'm not interested, that's all. I won't do it. I refuse to kill Wava. I refuse to interfere with her in any way."

"We could execute you for such a traitorous statement."

Nick shrugged. "That would be downright silly. You have few enough partisans without killing off an able-bodied one. I'm not disloyal. I haven't betrayed you."

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"But you allow betrayal to occur."

"Wava has said nothing. If she'd spoken to Darnell, we'd all be lying around full of lead by this time."

"You're acting the fool, Guttman," Maddy said hotly. "Let's get back to business, or the whole plan will fall through because of your stubbornness."

The German gave in, but with bad grace. "Very well. It is set for tomorrow at four A. M. That is when sleep is heaviest. Life beats feebly at four."

"I'll be ready," Nick said.

"The guns have been distributed. We will come up from our dungeons and kill the guards silently. Every man has been instructed and none will fail. The barracks will be bombed and the sound of the bomb will be the signal to come out into the open."

"I understand."

"Your job," Guttman went on, "will be at the submarine. You will have five men at the dock with you. The submarine must be taken and held at all costs."

"I'll do my best."

"After the first shock of our attack—after they've been stunned and disorganized—whatever of us are left will run for the sub. We will submerge immediately and get up into the sea."

"That's agreed."

"And no one," Guttman growled, "is to touch that devil Darnell. He is mine—understand? I will tear the life out of him with my own two hands. He is mine!"

"You can have him, I'm sure. No one objects."

"All right. Until four then."

"Until four."

NICK AND Maddy went out as they had come. They waited under the floor by the pedestal for some time. If a guard happened to be passing just as they moved it, they would be lost.

Crouching there in the dark, Nick said, "Maddy, you know what you're to do. Go straight to the submarine. Stay under cover. Get into it as soon as we've cleared the way. Stay out of danger as much as possible."

Her hand found his in the darkness. Squeezed it. "Nick."

"Yes?"

"Do you think we will succeed?"

"I don't think so."

"Neither do I, but it will be a glorious effort."

"Beyond all doubt," Nick replied drily.

"Another thing—I know how to set off the bomb. I learned from one of the captive scientists. It's really very simple."

"Let's not talk about setting off hydrogen bombs. They make a big noise and someone might get hurt." He grinned at her in the darkness.

"Nick, I think you're pretty wonderful."

"You're wonderful, too. Do you know what I want?"

"No," she replied softly, "but whatever it is—you can have it."

"I want to see you do Peter Pan again on Broadway. You personified ideal childhood, Maddy."

"Thank you, Nick."

"And you managed to be pretty sexy while you were doing it, too."

"I wish you'd come backstage that night at the Lyceum." There was a pause. "Oh, well—let's move the pedestal. We can't stay here all day."

They pushed it back ever so slowly until Nick could peek out. Then he moved swiftly, pulling Maddy up after him.

NICK SPENT the afternoon pacing his room. He yearned for something to take his mind off the business ahead, but there was nothing left to

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do. He'd already planted the dynamite under the side of Llanni's pool. He'd done that the night before after all the lights had been turned out for the night's sleeping period. Now, there was nothing to do but wait.

Late in the afternoon, he heard light footsteps. Wava's door closed. He waited a few moments, then went into the hall and knocked lightly. He entered without waiting, immediately after the knock, and found her standing in the middle of the room.

She had just removed her dress and wore only brief silk underthings. She whirled and held the dress close to her body. "You might give a person a chance to get dressed before you barge in! This is a private room!"

"I'm sorry."

Nick walked to the bed and sat down with his back to her. He said nothing, but his mind was full of what he'd seen just before the dress hid her body. Red marks of fingers on the creamy flesh above and around her breasts. Marks too symmetrical to have been made any other way. Marks of some tender-violent intimacy. And the dress did not hide smeared lipstick.

"You just came from Darnell's quarters?"

"That's where I work. I don't have as easy a time of it as some people."

Nick said nothing. He searched his soul for hurt over a soft body pressed hard by other hands. He found no hurt. But a deep sadness was there, over that and many things.

"It's a hell of a mess, isn't it, honey?" he said.

"People's lives are what they make them," she replied, and in her voice was the smugness of a satisfied shrew.

"Where did we go wrong, baby? Where did we go haywire?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. If you mean those few nights when—"

Somehow, that brought pain. "Shut up!"

He got up from the bed and came around to face her. There was a twisted grin on his face. "Sorry, honey. I'm edgy today. Forget it."

"Well, I must say—"

"This isn't you, baby. It's the only defense you can muster against what he's made you into. Are you in love with him?"

She bit her lip. Then her eyes fell.

"It's okay. Forget it. Just one thing. Have you told him about the Resistance?"

She waited for a long time with lowered eyes. Then she shook her head slowly in the negative.

He grasped her by the shoulders and shook her gently and with affection. "Good girl. So long now. I'll be seeing you."

But he never saw her, alive, again.

AT THREE-THIRTY, there were shadows moving quietly through the Big Bubble. Elusive shadows that went swiftly here and there to stop and blend with larger shadows.

Nick lounged casually on the dock near the submarine, making no effort to hide himself. He came and went as he pleased, at all hours, and no one barred his way.

The minutes crept on and Nick watched the silent deploying of the Resistance. And, even though watching for it, he was surprised at how little he saw.

The minute hand of his watch crept around the dial. It registered three fifty-five. There would be shadows crouching in the halls of the Administration Building now. Another minute—two—three. Now, there should be guards dying silently, in quick agony.

Nick glanced down at the dock edge where his squad was crouching. The minute hand crept on. Four o'clock.

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Zero Hour—and a tremendous roar split the quiet of the Big Bubble. At least, Nick thought grimly, the blowing up of the barracks had been right on the second. He took swift steps toward the submarine ramp as the heads of his squad popped into view. Then he stopped.

Something had gone wrong. The soldiers of Darnell, the loyal, death dealing brigades, had not been in the barracks. This was obvious, because at that exact moment, the lights went up and Darnell's men were pouring into the area. Nick had misidentified certain of the shadows.

Betrayal!

I COULD have killed her, Nick thought. Sometimes sentiment gets into a man's eyes. Sometimes it's bad business. He dived for the ramp leading to the submarine and was met by a withering flame of fire from the waiting men inside.

His instinct and reflexes threw him violently to the floor, and the red death spewed over his head to cut down all but one of the squad entrusted to his care. The lone survivor went headlong off the dock in a swan dive, and to Nick's knowledge, never was seen again.

Nick scrambled forward in as undignified a manner as could be imagined, in order to get the bulge of the submarine between himself and the scarlet murder belching forth from the submarine conning tower. Having achieved this place of comparative safety, he chose the wise course of remaining there, seeing no vital reason why he should step forward and get himself killed. Quite obviously, there was nothing he could do to save a lost situation. The Resistance was finished even before it had gotten well started.

Swiftly, Nick surveyed the pitiful scene. Darnell's perfectly trained corps were bent on the grim and impersonal business of putting down a revolt. They went about it like rows of terrible automatons. On all sides, the stunned and disorganized Underground was being cut to bloody ribbons. The screams of the dying and the wounded, sounding against a backdrop of flaming guns and murderers' cold faces, turned the Big Bubble into a page out of Dante's *Inferno*. And, standing on the open space in front of the administration building, taking in the carnage, a bearded death-mask of a face, was Tanko Darnell.

Then, Nick stiffened and the fine hairs on his neck began to rise as though a tiny snake crawled slowly toward the base of his skull. For one stalwart of the Underground was avoiding the fire of the soldiers. Like a great cat, the huge Guttman crawled along the edge of the pavement toward the administration plaza. How he avoided death, Nick would never know, because no part of his mind was bent upon avoiding it. Every fiber of his heart and being was concentrated upon the madman who was watching the show.

Nick Holiday lay with his face in the mud and prayed. So fervent, so intense was his desire to be heard, that he lost faith in the busy gods to whom earthmen take their woes. Without apology, he gave off petitioning them and turned in supplication to the gods of Llanni. Please let him make it. Keep fire off his wonderful stubborn hide until he can get his hands on that creature from hell! Let him kill that grinning sadist! Let Darnell die in the most exquisite of agonies, and you can have my soul forevermore.

The gods were condescending. Guttman reached Darnell from the flank—brought him down in a great screaming leap. In scant seconds, his great hands wrought such terrible havoc

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that Nick could see Darnell's blood spouting from even that distance.

Then Guttman stood up, presented his broad front to the rifles of his enemies and went down laughing, a flaming, living torch. But a blind man could see that Guttman died happy.

"Thanks, gods," Nick whispered fervently.

Then he remembered—and cursed himself for a blundering dolt. Llanni still in her prison. Llanni cowering in terror from a carnage her child's mind could not understand.

Nick hurled himself into the water and struck out for the opposite side, oblivious of death and blood as he struggled toward the great glass tank. He should have been killed, but he wasn't, so possibly Llanni's gods had spectacular power.

He made the far side. Lungs bursting, he staggered from the water and achieved the plunger hidden among the rocks. He drove the connection, falling to his knees in the dizziness of exhaustion.

The charge of dynamite thundered above lesser sounds, and the wall of Llanni's prison collapsed as a great wall of water thundered down into the bay. And Llanni, firmly astride her galfin, rode its crest.

Nick grinned. Then he lay his face down in the sand to rest. He laughed softly to himself. He was tired and none of it mattered much of a damn, anyhow.

LLANNI WAS terrorized. Her brain was numbed by the noises about her. Only one thought was in her mind —free! Free! Free! Long hours had she spent gazing at the hidden tunnel-mouth at the end of the bay. Now, her gods had listened and the tunnel was attainable. Like a green streak, the galfin plunged through the water.

But midway in flight, Llanni signalled sudden halt. Why, she did not know. But she could not leave. Something—there was something holding her back.

She saw him lying there then, and turned without questioning the urge. As she did so, hot fire flattened against her side and exploded through her being. A quick cry of pain came from her lips as she bent over to sweep Nicholas Holiday into her arms. A wordless signal to the galfin and the retreat was continued.

Down into the tunnel, with Nick close in her arms and savage joy in her heart. Free! Free! Down into the waters—out into the ocean from which they'd dragged her so many weary days ago. Now home; home to beloved Munesia, southward through the waters.

But now came instinct—a feeling that must lead her, even though she knew not from whence it sprang; follow it unquestioningly, though she knew in her great heart it meant death.

Nicholas Holiday was not for Munesia. He was not of it, not of the deep waters which were her life. Up above—somewhere up above—was Nicholas Holiday's world, and time was important. Upward. She knew not what lay above the waves, but only there could Nicholas Holiday continue to live.

Llanni gave fierce orders to the galfin. Surprised, it changed its course and flung upward toward the surface of the sea.

And instinct told Llanni the cold high waters would be her own graveyard—the same instinct which said they would be Nicholas Holiday's salvation.

Soon or it would be too late. Faster! Faster! Llanni goaded the galfin until again it was a green streak plunging up through the water. In a froth they broke water, shot into the sky of a terrible new world, then came

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down to float on its surface. Llanni stared about her, terrified. Off to the left lay a weird mass of twisted world stretching away to the horizon. What this was, Llanni did not know. The strange, dead frame works, twisted into this land—gave it a somber note. And away in the other direction was a moving thing. Llanni knew this for what it was; a boat of Nicholas Holiday's world. He should be carried to that boat, although Llanni knew she could never do this. But he must stay in this upper world where the boat could see him and come.

As she laid him across a floating timber, she felt the faint beating of his heart and was content.

But the pain and weakness within her was a curtain now, separating her from all worlds. Without guidance, the galfin sank down beneath the waves. Llanni clutched feebly at his tough hide, missed her grip, and drifted away in the waters.

Now she was alone. The galfin was gone. Nicholas Holiday was gone. She floated in the cold waters beneath the surface of the sea and knew this was final expiation to her gods.

This was death.

She smiled as the pain of her torn side, through which her life flowed out, was numbed. The gods were satisfied now.

In a moment, she would be free.

THE HUNGRY BRAIN

By Lee Owen

SIR HAROLD HARTLEY, noted physiologist points out a rather amazing bit of information. The human brain requires one-quarter of the energy output of the body during sleep! In waking, of course, the proportion is considerably different. This astounding fact about the energy consumption appears less so when we realize that the brain is the communication and control center of the body's activities, even the automatic reflexional ones such as breathing and the heart-beat.

While the brain itself is in the quiescent state of sleep, the majority of its cells are not active. Nevertheless, something like ten to the tenth power of cells are active performing their function of control and coordination. In light of this knowledge, the consumption of a quarter of the sleeper's energy for brain activity doesn't seem quite so startling as at first.

A study of the energy relations of the body and brain, liken the brain to a modern communication system in which energy is of secondary value, and liken the body to a machine in which energy is paramount. This comparison, indeed, is one of the key-thoughts of the science of cybernetics which deals with control and communication. In fact this peculiar relationship of power consumptions in machines and controls, is what triggered off the whole idea of cybernetics.

★ ★ ★

THEY WALK ON AIR!

By John Weston

GUIDED MISSILES are crammed full of a bewildering array of complex scientific gadgets, veritable Rube Goldberg nightmares of machinery. In particular, there are a number of rotating parts, usually gyroscopic in nature, which must turn at fantastically high speeds in order to be effective. In numbers of these parts, the technicians are employing a new type of bearing which has great possibilities.

In any type of instrumentation of this sort, the worst enemy is friction, and consequently every effort is made to eliminate it in any moving part. Even the thinnest oils heat up, become gummy and impede the smooth rotation of a high speed part such as a gyroscopic stabilizer. So, instead of supporting the rotors on oil as is conventionally done, they are floated on a layer of air not more than a thousandth of an inch thick!

These bearings literally use the molecules of gas as miniature ball bearings. It is hard to imagine anything more friction free. The principle, of course, is that the parts of the bearings are very closely fitted, and then an air pump drives air into the bearing supporting the rotor on a cushion of air. While only small and relatively light parts are treated this way, enormous speeds of rotation may be obtained in such a completely frictionless bearing.

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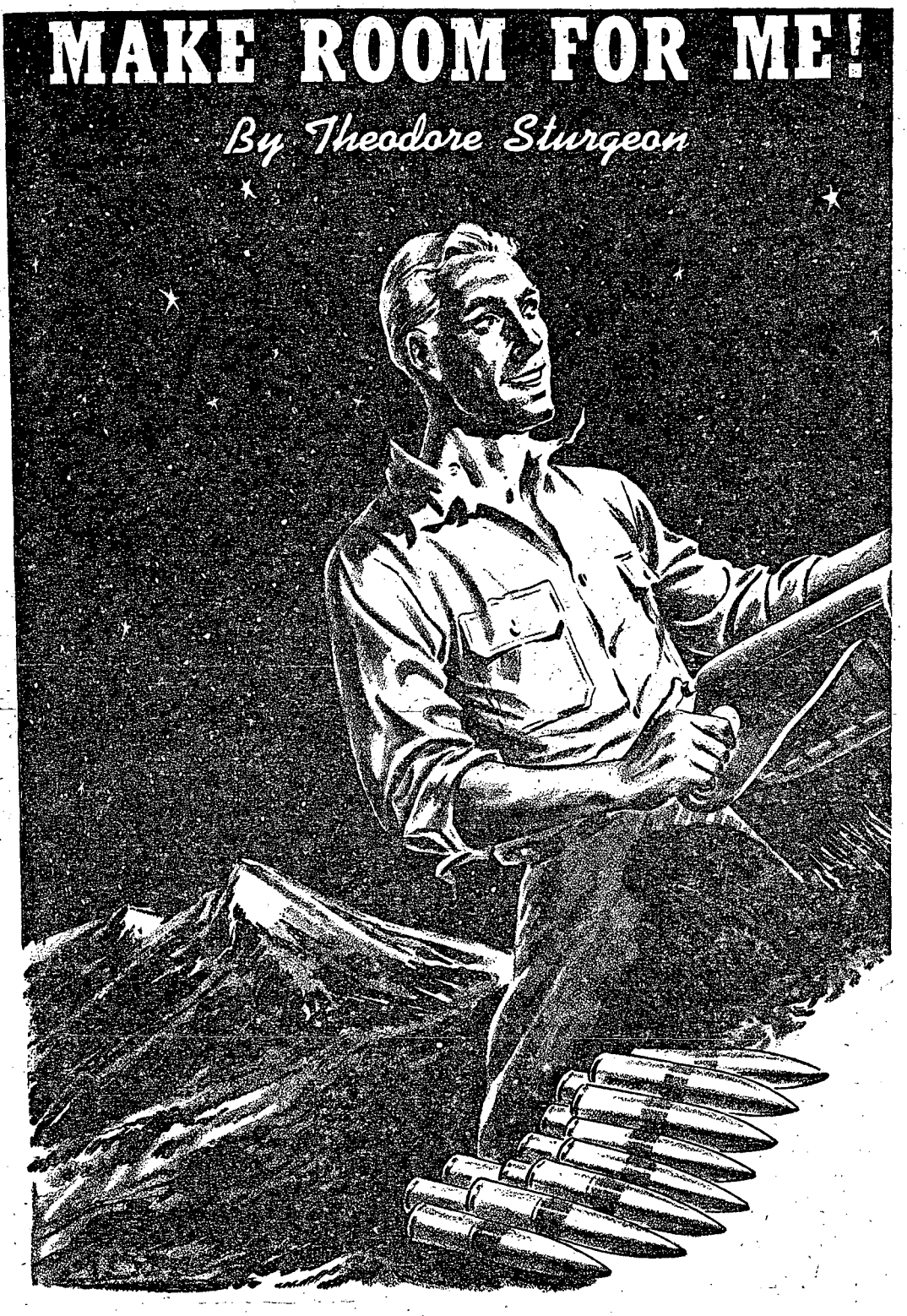
MAKE ROOM FOR ME!

By Theodore Sturgeon



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It sounded like the popping of a cork, and then far up among the stars there was a faint golden streak

It's not too important what kind of a house you live in. But when you move into somebody else's body, be very careful whose you choose

"WE SHALL never see him again....there will be no more arguments, no more pleasant thinking with Eudiche," mourned Torth to the other Titan.

"Come now. Don't be so pessimistic," said Larit, stroking the machine. "The idea of dissociation has horrified you, that's all. There is every chance that his components will fuse."

"So involved, so very involved," Torth fretted. "Is there really no way

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to send the complete psyche?"

"Apparently not. The crystals are of a limited capacity, you know. If we grow them larger, they cannot retain a psychic particle. If we sent all three encased particles together, their interaction would break down the crystals chemically. They must be sent separately."

"But—horrible!—How can one third of a psyche live alone?"

"Biologically, you know perfectly well. Psychologically, you need only look about you. You will find a single psyche only in each of our gracious hosts—"

"—gracious i n d e e d," muttered Torth, "and gracious they will remain, or die."

"—and each of the natives on the planet to which we sent Eudiche has but one psyche."

"How then can he occupy three of them?"

*"Torth, you insist on asking questions requiring a higher technological comprehension than yours to understand," replied the other in annoyance. "There are closer ties than physical proximity. Eudiche will avail himself of them. Let that suffice." More kindly, he added, "Eudiche will be all right. Wait; just wait."**

* * *

THE STATUE of Ben Franklin, by the very weight of its greyness, sobered the green sparkle of the campus. At the foot of the benevolent image the trio stood—Vaughn, tiny, with long braids of flaxen hair; Dran, slender and aquiline, and—apart from the others, as usual—Manuel, with heavy shoulders and deep horizontal creases over his thick brows.

Dran smiled at some chattering coeds who passed, then slanted his narrow face toward the semi-circle of stone buildings. "After three years," he said, "I've gotten over being delighted by my own uniqueness—the three miserable years it took me to convince myself that distinction and difference are not synonymous. And now that I'm *of* this place—no longer on the outside looking in, or on the inside looking on, I—"

"Who's so exceptional?" growled Manuel, moving closer. "Aside from the runt here, who never will get the knack of being a human being."

"Are you a specimen of humanity?" asked the girl stormily. "Manuel, I don't expect compliments from you, but I wish you'd try courtesy. Now listen. I have something to tell you. I—"

"Wait a minute," said Dran, "I have something more important, whatever you have on your mind. I've got the answer—for me, anyway—to this whole question of being the same as everyone else and being different at the same time. I—"

"You said it all last night," said Vaughn wearily. "Only you were so full of sherry that you didn't know what you were saying. I quote: 'Vaughn, not only your charming person but your poetry would be a lot more popular if you wouldn't hide behind this closed door of non-aggression and restraint.' Well, I've been thinking about that, and I—"

"M a n u e l," Dran interrupted, "you've got muscles. Throttle her, will you? Just a little. Just until I can put a predicate on this subject."

"I'd love to get started on that job," grinned Manuel, licking his lips. "Imagine how those wall eyes would pop."

"Keep your hands off me, animal," Vaughn hissed. "Dran, I'm trying to—"

"I will not be stopped," said Dran. With a gesture completely character-

*The author apologizes for this poor translation of the Titan personal pronoun, which, in the original, is singular and plural, masculine and feminine, and has no counterpart in our tongue.

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istic, he knocked back a strand of his red-gold hair, scattering ashes from his cigarette through it. "Be quiet and listen. You two have held still for a lot of my mouthings and gnashings of teeth about my being a white monkey—the one all the brown monkeys will tear to pieces just because he's different. Well, I have the solution."

"Get to the point," Manuel grunted. "It could be that I got a speech to make, too."

"Not until I've told you—" Vaughn began.

"Shut up, both of you," said Dran. "Especially you, Vaughn. All right. What are we here for?"

"To get a degree."

"We are not. At least, I'm not," said Dran. "The more I think of it, the less I think school teaches you anything. Oh, sure, there are some encyclopaedics that you sponge up, but that's secondary. A school's real function is to teach you how to learn. Period."

"All right—then what about the degree?"

"That's just to convince other people that you have learned how to learn. Or to convince yourself, if you're not sure. What I'm driving at is that *I'm* sure. I know all I need to know about how to learn. I'm leaving."

THERE WAS a stunned silence. Vaughn looked slowly from one to the other. Dran's eyebrows went up. "I didn't expect such a dramatic effect. Vaughn...? Say something!"

"Y-you've been reading my script!" she murmured. Her eyes were huge.

"What do you mean?"

"Why—I've been thinking... For more than a year I've known what I wanted to do. And this—" she waved a hand at the grey buildings— "this hasn't been it. This...interferes. And I wanted to tell you about that, and that you mustn't think it means that I've finished learning. I want to learn a world of things—but not here."

Manuel released a short bark of laughter. "You mean you made a great big decision—all by yourself?"

"I'll make a decision about you one of these days, now that I've learned the technique," she spat. "Dran... what are you going to do? Where are you going?"

"I have something lined up. Advertising—direct mail. It isn't too tough. I'll stay with that for a couple of years. See how the other half lives. The half with money, that is. When I'm ready, I'll drop it and write a novel. It'll be highly successful."

"Real cocky," said Manuel.

"Well, damn it, it will be. With me. *I'll* like it. So far as I'm concerned it will be successful. And what about you, Vaughn?"

"I have a little money. Not much. But I'll manage. I'll write poems." She smiled. "They'll be successful, too."

"Good thing you guys don't have to depend on what anyone else thinks," Manuel grunted. "Me, I do it the way the man wants it done or else."

"But you please yourself doing it," Dran said.

"Huh? I—never thought of it like that. I guess you're right. Well." He looked from Vaughn to Dran and back. They suddenly spoke, almost in unison. "Manuel! What are you going to—" and—"Manuel! What will you do now?"

"Me? I'll make out. You two don't think I *need* you?"

Vaughn's eyes grew bright. Dran put an understanding hand on her shoulder. He said, "Who writes this plot? What a switch! Manuel, of all people, clinging to these walls with the rest of the ivy, while Vaughn and I try our wings."

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"Sometimes you characters give me a pain in the back of my lap," said Manuel abruptly. "I hang around with you and listen to simple-minded gobbledegook in yard-long language, if it's you talking, Dran, and pink-and-purple sissification from the brat here. Why I do it I'll never know. And it goes that way up to the last gasp. So you're going to leave. Dran has to make a speech, real logical. Vaughn has to blow out a sigh and get misty-eyed." He spat.

"How would you handle it?" Dran asked, amused. Vaughn stared at Manuel whitely.

"Me? You really want to know?"

"This I want to hear," said Vaughn between her teeth.

"I'd wait a while—a long while—until neither of you was talking. Then I'd say, 'I joined the Marines yesterday.' And you'd both look at me a little sad. There's supposed to be something wrong with coming right out and saying something. Let's see. Suppose I do it the way Vaughn would want me to." He tugged at an imaginary braid and thrust out his lower lip in a lampoon of Vaughn's full mouth. He sighed gustily. "I have felt..." He paused to flutter his eyelashes. "I have felt the call to arms," he said in a histrionic whisper. He gazed off into the middle distance. "I have heard the sound of the trumpets. The drums stir in my blood." He pounded his temples with his fists. "I can't stand it—I can't! Glory beckons. I will away to foreign strands."

VAUGHN turned on her heel, though she made no effort to walk away. Dran roared with laughter.

"And suppose I'm you," said Manuel, his face taut with a suppressed grin. He leaned easily against the base of the statue and crossed his legs. He flung his head back. "Zeno of Miletus," he intoned, "in reflecting on the cromislon of the fortiseetus, was wont to refer to a razor as 'a check for a short beard.' While shaving this morning I correlated 'lather' with 'leather' and, seeing some of it on my neck, I recalled the old French proverb, *'Jeanne D'Arc'*, which means: The light is out in the bathroom. The integration was complete. If the light was out I could no longer shave. Therefore I can not go on like this. Also there was this matter of the neck. I shall join the Marines. Q. E. D., which means: thus spake Zarathusiasm."

Dran chuckled. Vaughn made a furious effort, failed, and burst out laughing. When it subsided, Manuel said soberly, "I did."

"You did what?"

"I joined the Marines yesterday."

Dran paled. Manuel looked at him in open astonishment. He had never seen Dran without an instant response before. And Vaughn clutched at his arms. "You didn't! You couldn't! Manuel...Manuel...the uniform..., the pain...you'll be *killed!*"

"Yup. But slowly. In agony. And as I lie there in the growing dark, a sweet thought will sustain me. I'll never again see another line of your lousy poetry. For Christ's sake!" he bellowed suddenly, "Get off that tragic kick, stupid! I'll be all right."

"What did you go and do a thing like that for?" Dran asked slowly.

"What are you and the reptile leaving for?" Manuel returned. "The same thing. This place has taught me all it can—for me. I'm going where I'll know who's my boss, and I'll know who takes orders from me. What I'll wear, where I'll live—someone else can decide that. Meantime I'll work in communications, which I'd be doing anyway, but someone else will buy the equipment and materials."

"You'll be caged. You'll never be

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free," said Vaughn.

"Free for what? To starve? Free to argue with salesmen and landlords? Nuts. I'll go and work with things I can measure, work with my hands, while you two are ex-prassing your torrtured ssouls. What would you like to see me do instead? Take up writing sonnets that nobody'll ever read? Suppose I do that, and *you* go join the Marines."

Dran touched Vaughn's arm. "He's right, Vaughn. What he's doing would be wrong for you, or for me, but it's right for him."

"I don't... I don't know what to do," she mourned.

"I do," said Manuel. "Let's go eat."

* * *

"WE ARE parasites," said the Titan, "which is the initial measure of our intelligence."

Torth said, "Our intelligence doesn't make it possible for us to survive on Titan."

"It's an impasse. The very act of settling the three components of our psyche into the brains of the natives gives us a home—and shortens the life of the native."

"Wouldn't that be true of the bipeds on the third planet?"

"To a degree," admitted the other. "But they are long-lived—and there are two billion of them."

"And how would we affect them?"

"Just as we affect the natives here."

Torth made the emanation which signified amusement. "That should make them very unhappy."

"You speak of a matter of no importance," said the other irritably. "And it is not true. They will be as incapable of expressing unhappiness as anything else." He applied himself again to the machine, with which he was tracking the three crystalline casings which carried Eudiche on his earthward journey.

* * *

AFTER DINNER they went to a concert. They sat in their favorite seats—the loges—and waited, each wrapped in his own thoughts. Dran stared at the dusty carved figures under the ceiling. Manuel sketched busily—a power-operated shock absorber, this time. Between them Vaughn sat, withdrawn and dreamy, turning night-thoughts into free verse.

They straightened as the conductor appeared and crossed the platform, amid applause which sounded like dead leaves under his feet. When he raised his baton, Vaughn glanced swiftly at the faces of the other two, and then they pressed forward in unison.

It was Bach—the *Passacaglia* and *Fugue in C Minor*. The music stepped and spiralled solemnly around them, enclosing them in a splendid privacy. They were separate from the rest of the audience, drawn to each other. Manuel and Dran moved slightly toward Vaughn, until their shoulders touched. Their eyes fixed unmoving on the orchestra.

At the last balanced, benevolent crescendo they rose together and left, ahead of the crowd. None of them cared to talk, strangely. They walked swiftly through the dark streets to a brightly lit little restaurant several blocks from the Academy.

In a high-walled booth, they smiled to each other as if acknowledging a rich secret. Then Vaughn's eyes dropped; she pulled at her fingers and sighed.

"No effusions from you, please," said Dran—possibly more coldly than he intended. "We all felt it, whatever it was. Don't mess it up."

Vaughn's gaze was up again, shocked. Manuel said, with an astonishing gentleness, with difficulty, "I was—somewhere else, but you were with me. And we all seemed to be—to be walking, or climbing..." He shook

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his massive head. "Nuts. I must be thirsty or something. What do you want, runt? Dran?"

Vaughn didn't answer. She was staring at Dran, her violet eyes dark with hurt.

"Speak up, chicken. I didn't mean to crush you. I just didn't feel like listening to an iambic extravagance. Something happened to all of us."

"Thanks f-for crediting me with so little sensitivity that you think I didn't feel it. That you think I'd spoil it!"

"Not too little sensitivity. Too much—*and* out of control. I'm sorry," Dran relented. "Let's order." He turned to Manuel, and froze in surprise at the look in the other's face. It was a look of struggling, as if unwelcome forces were waking within him, disturbing the rough, familiar patterns of his thinking.

JOE PASSED, flashy, noisy, wide open for hurt. The trio had often discussed Joe. Superficially, he was pushing into their group because of Vaughn, who appeared to make him quite breathless. Dran had once said however, that it went deeper than that. Joe could not abide a liaison that he couldn't understand. Joe called, "Hi! As I live and bleed, it's the internal triangle. Nice to see you, Vaughn. When am I going to do it on purpose instead of by accident?"

"Is this drip necessary?" Manuel muttered.

"I'll see you soon, Joe," Vaughn said, smiling at him. "We have a class together tomorrow. I'll talk to you about it then." Her nod was a warm touch, and a dismissal. Joe appeared about to speak, thought better of it, waved and went away.

"That impossible idiot," growled Dran. "A more quintessential jerk I have yet to meet."

"Oh, Dran! He's not that bad! Just undeveloped. Of course, he isn't one of *us*, but he's fun all the same. He reads good poetry, and he's quite a—"

Manuel brought his hand down with a crash. "*That's* what I was after. 'One of us.' What do you mean, 'one of us?' Who joins this union? I'm not 'one of us.' You two have more in common than you have with me."

Vaughn touched his hand. "Manuel," she said softly. "Oh, Manuel! Why, everyone links us together. I—I know I do. So much so that until now I didn't think it required questioning. It's something you accept as natural."

Dran's eyes brightened. "Wait, Vaughn. Let's not call it natural. Let's examine it. See what we get. I've been chewing on it since the business with the music tonight anyway."

Manuel shrugged. "Okay. What do the runt and I share after all? You and I can agree on politics, and we have one or two mechanical interests. But you, Vaughn—you..." He wet his lips. "Hell!" he exploded. "You're —useless!"

"I can ignore that," said Vaughn, very obviously ignoring nothing, "because you are only trying to hurt me."

"Hold on," said Dran easily. "I think this is worth an effort to avoid that kind of emotional smokescreen. You particularly, Manny. You sound resentful, and I don't know that you have anything to resent."

"She makes me mad, that's all. Look—there are a lot of useful things in the world—lock washers... cotter pins. But this—this dame! You couldn't use her for a paperweight. She's a worm trying to be a snake. You can't approach her logically. I can get to you that way, Dran, though I'll admit the going gets a little swampy sometimes."

"Perhaps this thing we have," said Vaughn softly, "is more than emo-

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tion, or intellect, or any of those things."

"Here we go again," snorted Manuel.

"A mystic entity or something?" Dran chuckled. "I doubt it. But there is something between us—all of us. It isn't limited to any two. We all belong. I'm not sure of what it's for, or even if I like it. But I'm not prepared to deny it. You aren't either, Manny."

"Manuel," said Vaughn urgently. She reached across and touched him, as if she wanted to press her eager words into him. "Manuel—haven't you ever felt it even a little? Didn't you, tonight? Didn't you? In your own terms....Manuel, just this once, I'd like to know honestly, without any sneers."

Manuel glowered at her, hesitated, then said, "What if I have?" truculently. In a gentler tone, he added, "Oh, I have, all right. Once or twice. It—like I said, damn it, it makes me mad. I don't like getting pushed around by something I don't understand. It'll probably stop when I get away from here, and good riddance to it."

Vaughn touched her knuckles to her teeth. She whispered, "To me, it's something to treasure."

Dran grinned at her. "If you like it, it's got to be fragile, hm? Vaughn, it isn't. And I think Manny's in for a surprise if he thinks distance is going to make any difference."

"I have hopes," Manuel said sullenly.

Dran spread his hands on the table and looked at them. "Vaughn stands in awe of this—this thing we have, and to Manuel it's like a dose of crabs. Excuse me, chicken. Far as I'm concerned, it's something that will bear watching. I can't analyze it now. If it gets weaker I will be able to analyze it even less. If it gets stronger it will show its nature no matter what I do. So I'm going to relax and enjoy it. I can say this much..." He paused, frowning, searching for words. "There is a lowest common denominator for us. We're all 'way off balance. And our imbalances are utterly different in kind, and negligibly different in degree."

Vaughn stared dully. Manuel said, "Huh?"

Dran said, more carefully, "Vaughn's all pastels and poetry. Manuel's all tools and technology. I'm—"

"All crap and complication," said Manuel.

"Manuel!"

Dran laughed. "He's probably right, Vaughn. Anyway, we're all lopsided to the same degree, which is a lot, and that's the only real similarity between us. If we three were one person, it'd be a somebody, that's for sure."

"It'd be an insect," Manuel scowled. "Six legs." He looked at Vaughn. "With your head. No one'd know the difference."

"You're ichor-noclastic," said Dran. Vaughn groaned. Manuel said, "That was one of those puns. The only part I got was the 'corn'. Where the hell's the waiter?"

* * *

"WHY EUDICHE?" Torth fretted. "Why couldn't they send someone else?"

"Eudiche is expendable," said the other parasite shortly.

"Why? His balance is so perfect..."

"Answer restricted. Go away. One-third of his psyche has found a host and is settling in. The observations are exceedingly difficult, because of the subtlety of Eudiche's operations. And you are most exasperating."

* * *

FOR THE third time in a week, Vaughn was lunching with Joe—

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a remarkable thing, considering that in the two years since her departure from the University she had seen less and less of old acquaintances. But after all—Joe was easy to be with because she didn't have to pretend. She could be as moody as she chose. He would patiently listen to her long and misty reflections, and let her recite poetry without protest. The meetings did not hurt her, and Joe seemed to enjoy them so....

But Joe had something to offer this time, rather than something to take. As the waitress took their dessert order and left, he gently placed a little plush box beside her coffee cup. "Won't you consider it at all?" he asked diffidently.

Her hand was on the box, reflexively, before she realized what it was. Then she looked at him. Thoughts, feelings, swirled about each other within her, like petals, paper, dust and moths in a small sudden whirlwind. Her eyes fixed on his shy, anxious face, and she realized that she had seldom looked directly at him .. and that he was good to look at. She looked at the box and back at him, and then closed her violet eyes. Joe as a suitor, as a potential lover, was an utterly new idea to her. Joe as a bright-faced, carefully considerate *thing* was not Joe with hands, Joe with a body, Joe with habit patterns and a career and tooth-paste and beneficiaries for life insurance. She felt flattered and bewildered and uncertain, and—warm.

And then something happened. It was as if an indefinable presence had raised its head and was listening. This alien attentiveness added a facet to the consideration of Joe. It made the acceptance or rejection of Joe a more significant thing than it had been. The warmth was still there, but it was gradually overlaid by a—a knowledge that created a special caution, a particular inviolability.

She smiled softly then, and her hand lifted away from the box.

"There's nothing final about an engagement," Joe said. "It would be up to you. Every minute. You could give me back the ring any time. I'd never ask you why. I'd understand, or try to."

"Joe." She put out her hand, almost touched him, then drew it back. "I...you're so *very* sweet, and this is a splendid compliment. But I can't do it. I—If I succeeded in persuading myself into it, I'd only regret it, and punish you."

"Umm," mused Joe. His eyes were narrowed, shrewd and hurt. "Tied up, huh? Still carrying the same old torch."

"The same—" Vaughn's eyes were wide.

"That Dran Hamilton character," said Joe tiredly, almost vindictively. He reached for the ring box. "Part two of the unholy trio—"

"Stop it!"

It was the first time he had seen her gentle violet eyes blazing. It was probably the first time they ever had. Then she picked up her gloves and said quietly, "I'd like to go now, Joe, if you don't mind."

"But—but Vaughn—what did I—I didn't mean any—"

"I know, I know," she said wearily. "Why, I haven't even thought about them for a long time. For too long. Perhaps I should have. I—*know* I should have. Joe, I have to go. I've got to get out of here. It's too small. Too many people, too many cheap little lights. I need some sun."

Almost frightened, he paid the check and followed her out. She was walking away as if she were alone. He hesitated, then ran to catch up with her.

"It's a thing that you couldn't un-

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derstand," she said dully when he drew alongside. She did not look up; for all he knew she may have been talking before he reached her. She went on, "There were three of us, and that's not supposed to be right. Twos, and twos, and twos, all through literature and the movies and the soap operas. This is something different. Or maybe it isn't different. Maybe it's wrong, maybe I'm too stupid to understand. . . . Joe, I'm sorry. Truly I am. I've been very selfish and unkind." There was that in her voice which stopped him. He stood on the pavement watching her move away. He shook his head, took one step, shook his head again, and then turned and plunged blindly back the way he had come.

* * *

"YOU'RE getting old," said Torth maliciously.

"Go away," said the other. "With two particles assimilated and the third about to be, matters have reached a critical point."

"There is nothing you could do about it no matter what happened," said Torth.

"Will you go away? What did you come for, anyway?"

"I was having an extrapolative session with another triad," Torth explained. "Subject: is the Eudiche experiment a hoax? Conclusion: it could be. Corollary: it might as well be, for all it has benefited our race. I came for your comments on that. You are an unpleasant and preoccupied entity, but for all that you are an authority."

The old one answered with angry evenness: "Answers: The Eudiche experiment is no hoax. It will benefit the race. As soon as Eudiche has perfected his fusion technique, we shall emigrate. Our crystalline casings are dust-motes to the bipeds of the third planet; our psychic existence will be all but unnoticeable to them until we synthesize. When we do, they will live for us, which is right and just. They will cease thinking their own thoughts, they will discontinue their single-minded activities. They will become fat and healthy and gracious as hosts."

"But observations indicate that they feed themselves largely by tilling the soil, that they combat the rigors of their climate by manufacturing artificial skins and complex dwelling shelters. If we should stop all that activity, they will die off, and we—"

"You always were a worrier, Torth," interrupted the other. "Know, then, that there are many of them and few of us. Each of us will occupy three of them, and those three will work together to keep themselves fed and us contented. The groups of three will be hidden in the mass of bipeds, having little or no physical contact with one another and remaining largely undetected. They will slaughter as they become hungry; after all, they are also flesh-eaters, and the reservoir of unoccupied bipeds will be large indeed. If, after we get there, the bipeds never plant another seed nor build another dwelling, their own species will still supply an inexhaustible supply of food purely by existing to be slaughtered as needed. They breed fast and live long."

Torth saluted the other. "We are indeed entering upon an era of plenty. Your report is most encouraging. Our present hosts are small, few, and too easy to kill. I assume that the bipeds have somewhat the same miniscule intelligence?"

"The bipeds of the third planet," said the other didactically, "have mental powers several hundred times as powerful as do those we have dominated here. We can still take them over, of course, but it will be troublesome. Look at the length of time it is tak-

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ing Eudiche. However, the reward is great. Once we have disrupted their group efforts by scattering our triads among them, I can predict an eternity of intriguing huntings and killings in order for our hosts to feed themselves. Between times, life will be a bountiful feast of their vital energies.

"Now, leave me, Torth. As soon as the final part of Eudiche's triad is settled in, we can expect the synthesis, by which he will come into full operation as an entity again. And that I want to observe. He has chosen well, and his three seeds are sprouting on fertile soil indeed."

"You have been uncharacteristically polite and helpful," conceded Torth. He left.

* * *

DRANLEY HAMILTON drank the highball with the cold realization that it was one too many, and went on talking cleverly about his book. It was easy to do, because for him it was so easy to define what these fawning critics, publishers, clubwomen and hangers-on wanted him to say. He was a little disgusted with his book, himself, and with these people, and he was enjoying his disgust immensely, purely because he was aware of it and of his groundless sense of superiority.

Then there was a sudden, powerful agreement within him, compounded of noise, heat, stupidity and that last highball, which made him turn abruptly, to let a press-agent's schooled wisecrack spend itself on his shoulder-blades as he elbowed his way through the room to the terrace doors. Outside, he stood wth his arms on the parapet, looking out over the city and thinking, "Now, that didn't do me any good. I'm acting like something from the Village. Art for Art's sake. What's the matter with me anyway?"

There was a light step behind him. "Hello, Dranley Hamilton."

"Oh—it's you." He took in the russet hair, the blend of blendings which she used for a complexion. He had not noticed her before. "Do you know I have hung around this literary cackle-factory for the past two hours only because you were here and I wanted to get you alone?"

"Well!" said the girl. Then, with the same word in a totally different language, she added, "Well?"

He leaned back against the parapet and studied her tilted eyes. "No," he said finally. "No. I guess I was thinking of somebody else. Or maybe even something else."

Her real defenses went up in place of the party set. "Excuse *me!*" she said coldly.

"Oh, think nothing of it," he responded. He slapped her shoulder as if it were the withers of a friendly horse, and went back to the reception. *That was lousy,* he thought. *What's the matter with me?*

"Dran." It was Mike Pontif, from his publisher's publicity department. "You got that statement up about your next novel?"

"Next novel?" Dran looked at him thoughtfully. "There's not going to be a next novel. Not until I catch up on...something I should be doing instead." At the publicity man's bewildered expression, he added, "Going to bone up on biology."

"Oh," said the man, and winked. "Always kidding."

Dran was not kidding.

MANUEL crumpled up the letter and hurled it into the corner of the communications shack. He shouldered through the door and went out on the beach, his boots thudding almost painfully down on the rough white coral sand. He drove his feet into the gritting stuff, stamping so that the heavy muscles of his thighs felt it. He scooped up the stripped

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backbone of a palm frond and cut at the wet sand by the water's edge as he walked, feeling the alternate pull of shoulders and chest.

He needed something. It wasn't women or liquor or people or solitude. It wasn't building or fighting or laughter. He didn't even need it badly. What he did want badly was to find out what this gentle, steady, omnipresent need was. He was sick of trying this and that to see if it would stop this infernal tugging.

He stopped and stared out to sea. The thick furrows across his forehead deepened as he thought about the sea, and the way people wrote about it. It was always alive, or mysterious, or restless, or something. Why were people always hanging mysterious qualities on what should be commonplace? He was impatient with all that icky business.

"It's just wet salt and distance," he muttered. Then he spat, furious with himself, thinking how breathless the runt would be if she heard him say such a hunk of foolishness. He turned and strode back to the shack, feeling the sun too hot on the back of his neck, knowing he should have worn his helmet. He kicked open the screen door, blinked a moment against the indoor dimness, and went to the corner. He picked up the letter and smoothed it out.

"From some remembered world
We broke adrift
Like lonely stars
Divided at their birth.

For some remembered dream
We wait, and search
With riven hearts
A vast and alien earth..."

With the poem in his hand, Manuel glared around at useful things—the transmitter, the scrambler, the power supply. He looked at worthwhile things—the etched aluminum bracelets, the carved teak, the square-knotted belt he had made. And he looked at those other things, so meticulously machined, so costly in time and effort, so puzzling in function, that he had also made without knowing why. He shook the paper as if he wanted to hurt it. Why did she write such stuff? And why send it to him? What good was it?

He carried it to the desk, ripped out his personal file, and put it away. He filed it with Dran Hamilton's letters. He had no file for the runt's stuff.

WHEN SHE concluded that she loved Dran, Vaughn wrote and said so, abruptly and with thoroughness. His answering telegram made her laugh and cry. It read:

NONSENSE, CHICKEN! ROMANTIC LOVE WRONG DIAGNOSIS. I JUDGE IT A CONVENTIONAL POETIC IMPULSE BETTER CONFINED TO PAPER. A CASE OF VERSE COME VERSE SERVED. TAKE A COLD SHOWER AND GO WRITE YOURSELF A SONNET. BESIDES, WHAT ABOUT MANUEL? HE ARRIVES, INCIDENTALLY, NEW YEAR'S EVE AND INTENDS MEETING ME AT YOUR HOUSE. OKAY?

Dran arrived first, looking expensive and careless and, to Vaughn, completely enchanting. He bounded up the front steps, swung her off her feet and three times around before he kissed her, the way he used to do when they were children. For a long while they could say nothing but commonplaces, though their eyes had other things to suggest.

Dran leaned back in a kitchen chair as if it were a chaise longue and fitted a cigarette to a long ivory holder. "The holder?" he chattered. "Pure affectation. It does me good. Some-

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times it makes me laugh at myself, which is healthy, and sometimes it makes me feel fastidious, which is harmless. You look wonderful with your hair down. Never pin it up or cut it again. Manuel's just turned down a commission. He ought to arrive about six, which gives us plenty of time to whirl the wordage. I liked your latest poems. I think I can help you get a collection published. The stuff's still too thin in the wrong places, though. So are you."

Vaughn turned down the gas under the percolator and set out cups. "You do look the successful young author. Oh, Dran, I'm *so* glad to see you!"

He took her hand, smiled up into her radiant face. "I'm glad too, chicken. You had me worried there for a while, with that love business."

Vaughn's eyes stopped seeing him for a moment. "I was—silly, I suppose," she whispered.

"Could be," he said cheerfully. "I'll tell you, hon—I like women. Without question there's a woman somewhere on earth that will make me go pitty-pat, quit drinking, write nothing but happy endings, and eat what's given to me instead of what I want. Maybe I've already met her and don't realize it. But one thing I'm sure of is that you're not that woman."

"What makes you so sure?"

"The same thing that makes you sure of it. You had a momentary lapse, it seems, but—come now; do you love me?"

"I wish Manuel would get here."

"Isn't that irrelevant?"

"No."

Then the coffee boiled over and the thread was lost.

THEY TALKED about Dran's book until Manuel arrived. The book was a strange one—one of those which captivates or infuriates, with no reader-reactions between the extremes. There were probably far more people who were annoyed by it than not, "which," said Dran, "is one of the few things the book has in common with its author."

"That remark," laughed Vaughn, "is the first you have made which sounded the way your picture in the *Literary Review* looked. It was awful. The decadent dilettante—the bored and viceful youth."

"It sells books," he said. "It's the only male answer to the busty book-jacket, or breast seller. I call it my frontispiece pose; separate but uplifted."

"And doubly f a l s e," snapped Vaughn. When he had quieted, she said, "But the book, Dran. There was one thing in there really worth mentioning—between us. The thing the critics liked the least."

"Oh—the dancer? Yes—they all said she was always present, never seen. Too little character for such a big influence."

"That's what I meant," said Vaughn. "I know and you know—and Manuel? We'll ask him—that the dancer wasn't a person at all, but an omnipresent idea, a pressure. Right?"

"Something like that cosmic search theme that keeps pushing you around in your work," he agreed. "I wonder what Manuel's counterpart is. It would have to be something he'd turn on a lathe."

Vaughn smiled. And then there was a heavy tread on the porch, the front door flew open, and the room was full of Manuel. "Hi, Dran. Where's the runt? Come out from under the furniture, you little—oh. There you are. Holy cow," he bellowed. "Holy sufferin' sepoys! You've shrunk!"

Dran threw up his hands. "Sepoys. Foreign background. Authentic touch."

Vaughn came forward and put out a demure hand. "I haven't shrunk, Manuel. It's you. You're thicker and wid-

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er than ever."

He took her hand, squeezed it, apologized when she yelped, rubbed his knuckles into her scalp until she yelped again, and threw himself onto the divan. "Lord, it's cold. Let's get going. Do something about this New Year's Eve and welcome home and stuff."

"Can't we just stay here and talk awhile?" asked Vaughn in rumpled petulance.

"What's the matter, runt?" Manuel asked in sudden concern, for Vaughn's eyes were filling.

Dran grinned. "I come in here, ice-cold and intellectual, and kiss the lass soundly. You come flying through the door, Lochinvar, shake hands with her and then proceed to roll her around like a puppy. Like the song says—try a little tenderness."

"You be quiet!" Vaughn almost shouted.

"Oh, so that's what you want." He strode across to Vaughn, brushed aside her protecting arms, and kissed her carefully in the exact center of the forehead. "Consider yourself smootched," he growled, "and we'll have no more of this lollygagging. Vaughn, you're acting like an abandoned woman."

Vaughn laced her anger with laughter as she said, "Abandoned is right. Now wait while I get my coat."

"I BROUGHT something back with me," Manuel said.

They were at a corner table at Enrique's, immersed in the privacy of noise, lights, and people. "What is it?" asked Vaughn. "Something special in costume jewelry?"

"Always want gilding, don't you, lily? Yes, I have the usual cargo. But that's not what I mean."

"Quell your greed," said Dran. "What is it, Manny?"

"It's a..." He swizzled his drink. "It's a machine. I don't know what it is."

"You don't—but what does it do? What's it made of?"

"Wire and a casting and a machined tube and ceramics, and I built it myself and I don't know what it does."

"I hate guessing games," said Dran petulantly.

Vaughn touched his arm, "Leave him alone, Dran. Can't you see he's bothered about it?" She turned quickly to the Marine, stroked the ribbons on his chest. "Talk about something else if you want to. What are these for?" she asked solicitously.

Manuel looked down at the ribbons, then thumbed the catch and removed them. He dropped them into Vaughn's hand. "For you," he said, his eyes glinting. "As a reward for talking like a hot damned civilian. I won't need 'em any more. My hitch is up; I'm out."

"Why, Manuel?"

"It's...I get—spells, sort of." He said it as if he were confessing to leprosy or even body odor. "Trances, like. Nobody knows about it. I wanted to get out from under before the brass wised up."

Vaughn, whose terror of "the ills our flesh is heir to" amounted to a neurosis, gasped and said, "Oh! What is it? Are you sick? What do you think it is? Don't you think you ought to have an examination right away? Where does it hurt? Maybe it's a—"

Dran put an arm around her shoulders and his other hand firmly over her mouth. "Go on, Manny."

"Thanks, Dran. QRM, we call that kind of background noise in the Signal Corps. Shut up, short-change. About those spells...everything seems to sort of—recede, like. And then I work. I don't know what I'm doing, but my hands do. That's how I built this thing."

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"What sort of a thing is it?"

Manuel scratched his glossy head. "Not a gun, exactly, but something like it. Sort of a solenoid, with a winding like nothing you ever dreamed of, and a condenser set-up to trigger it."

"A gun? What about projectiles?"

"I made some of those too. Hollow cylinders with a mechanical bursting arrangement."

"Filled with what?"

"Filled with nothing. I don't know what they're supposed to hold. Something composed of small particles, or a powder, or something. It wouldn't be an explosive, because there's this mechanical arrangement to scatter the stuff."

"Fuse?"

"Time," Manuel answered. "You can let her go now. I think she's stopped."

Dran said, "Manny, I've got the charge for your projectiles." He raised his hand a fraction of an inch. Vaughn said, "Let me *go!* Dran, let me go! Manuel, maybe you ate too much of that foreign—"

DRAN'S hand cut her off again. Manuel said, "Like holding your hand over a faucet with a busted washer, isn't it?"

"More like getting a short circuit in a Klaxon. Vaughn, stop wriggling! Go on, Manny. I might as well tell you, something like it has happened to me. But I'll wait until you've finished. What about the fuse timing?"

"Acid vial. Double acting. There's an impact shield that pops up when a shell is fired, and a rod to be eaten through which starts a watch-movement. That goes for eight days. As for the acid—it'd have to be something really special to chew through that rod. Even good old Aqua Regia would take months to get through it."

"What acid are you using?"

Manuel shook his head. "That's one of the things I don't know," he said unhappily. "That acid, and the charge, and most of all what the whole damned thing is for—those things. I don't know."

"I think I've got your acid too," said Dran, shifting his hand a little because Vaughn showed signs of coming up for air. "But where are your specifications? What's the idea of making a rod so thick you can't find an acid to eat through it?"

Manuel threw up his hands. "*I* don't know, Dran. I know when it's right, that's all. I know before I rig my lathe or milling machine what I'm after." His face darkened, and his soft voice took on a tone of fury. "I'm sick and tired of getting pushed around. I'm tired of feeling things I can't put a name to. For the first time in my life I can't whip something or get away from it."

"Well, what are you going to do?"

"What *can* I do? Get out of the service, hole up somewhere, finish this work."

"How do you know it won't go on for the rest of your life?"

"I don't know. But I know this. I know what I've done is done right, and that when it's finished, that'll be the end of it," said Manuel positively. "Hey—you better turn her loose. The purple face goes great with the hair, but it's beginning to turn black."

Dran released Vaughn, and just then the bells began to ring.

* * *

"OLD ONE—"

The other turned on Torth. "Get out. Get out and leave me alone. Get out!"

Torth got.

THE BELLS....

"Not now," smiled Vaughn. "Not now. I'll give you rascals the punishment you deserve next year sometime." She reached out her arms,

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and they came close to her. She kissed Manuel, then Dran, and said, "Happy New Year, darlings."

The bells were ringing, and the city spoke with a mighty voice, part hum, part roar, part whistle, part scream, all a unison of joy and hope. *"Should auld acHappy-Nooóo Yearzhz-z-z-zh-h-h...."* said the city, and Manuel pulled Vaughn closer (and Dran with her, because Dran was so close to her) and Manuel said, "This is it. This is right, the three of us. I quit. Whether I like it or not don't matter. I got it and I'm stuck with it. I..."

EUDICHE!

No one said that. No one shouted it out, but for a split second there was a gasping silence in the club, in the floors above and the floors below, as three abstracts coalesced and a great subetheric emanation took place. It was more joyous than all the joy in the city, and a greater voice than that of all the other voices; and it left in a great wave and went rocketing out to the stars. And then someone started to sing again, and the old song shook the buildings.

"...and never brought to mind..."

* * *

"IT'S DONE!" said the old one. Torth replied caustically. "I appreciate the news. You realize that not one of us on Titan could have missed that signal."

"Eudiche has succeeded," exulted the old one. "A new era for our race ...on his next transmission we will start the emigration."

"And you had doubts of Eudiche."

"I did—I did. I admit it. But it is of no moment now—he has overcome his defection."

"What is it, this defection?"

"Stop your ceaseless questions and leave me to my joy!"

"Tell me that, decrepit one, and I shall go."

"Very well, Eudiche was imbalanced. He suffered from an overbroadening of the extrapolative faculty. We call it empathy. It need not concern you. It is an alien concept and a strange disease indeed."

* * *

EUDICHE left, still in three parts, but now one. He stopped at the railroad station for a heavy foot-locker, and at a hotel for a large suitcase. And in the long ride in a taxi, Eudiche thought things out—not piecemeal, not single-mindedly in each single field, but with the magnificent interaction of a multiple mind.

"Is it certain that everything will fit together?" asked the mechanical factor.

"It certainly should. The motivation was the same, the drive was almost identical, and the ability in each case was of a high order," said the intellectual.

The aesthetic was quiet, performing its function of matching and balancing.

The mechanical segment had a complimentary thought for the intellectual. "That spore chest is a mechanical miracle for this planet. Wasn't it gruelling, without a full mechanical aptitude to help?"

"The bipeds have wide resources. Once the design is clear, they can make almost anything. The spores themselves have started lines of research on molds, by the way, that will have far-reaching effects."

"And good ones," murmured the aesthetic. "Good ones."

Far away from the city Eudiche paid the driver and the intellectual told him to come back in the morning. And then Eudiche struck off through the icy fields, across a frozen brook, and up a starlit slope, carrying with him the spore case, the projector, and the projectiles.

It was cold and clear, and the stars competed with one another—and

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helped one another, too, the aesthetic pointed out: "...for every star which can't outshine the others seems to get behind and help another one be bright."

Eudiche worked swiftly and carefully and set up the projector. The spores were loaded into the projectiles, and the projectiles were primed with the acid and set into the gun.

The aesthetic stood apart with the stars, while the mechanical and the intellectual of Eudiche checked the orbital computations and trained the projector. It was exacting work, but there was not a single wasted motion.

The triggering was left to charge for a while, and Eudiche rested. The aesthetic put a hand to the projector —that seeking hand, always, with her, a gesture of earnestness.

"Back to Titan, and may the race multiply and grow great," she intoned. "Search the spaces between the stars and find Titan's path; burst and scatter your blessings at his feet."

The condensers drank and drank until they had their fill and a little over—

Phup! It was like the popping of a cork. Far up, seemingly among the stars, there was a faint golden streak, gone instantly.

"Reload," said the intellectual.

TWO WORKED; the third, by her presence, guided and balanced and added proportion to each thought, each directive effort. Eudiche waited, presently, for the projector to charge again. "Earth..." crooned the aesthetic. "Rich, wide, wonderful earth, rich with true riches, rich in its demonstrations of waste...wealthy earth, which can afford to squander thousands upon thousands of square miles in bleak hills on which nothing grows ...wealthy earth with its sea-sunk acres, its wandering rivers which curiously seek everything of interest, back and forth, back and backwards and seaward again, seeking in the flatlands. And for all its waste it produces magnificently, and magnificently its products are used. Humans are its products, and through the eyes of humans are seen worlds beyond worlds ...in the dreams of the dullest human are images unimaginable to other species. Through their eyes pour shapes and colors and a hungry hope that has no precedent in the cosmos."

"Empathy," defined the intellectual: "The ability to see through another's eyes, to feel with his fingertips.

"To know fire as the feathers of a Phoenix know it. To know, as a bedded stone, the coolth of brookwater..."

Phup!

"Reload," said the intellectual.

In its time the second projectile followed, and then a third and a fourth.

"THIS IS the machine," old Torth said to the youngster. "It was monopolized, long ago, by a caustic old triad who has since died. And may I join him soon, for it troubles me to be so old."

"And what was the machine for?"

"One Eudiche was analyzed into his three components and sent to that star there."

"It's a planet."

"Youth knows too much, too young," grumbled Torth.

"And why was Eudiche sent?"

"To test the sending; to synthesize himself there; and to prepare for a mass emigration of our kind to that planet."

"He failed?"

"He failed. He took over three inhabitants successfully enough, but that was all. He had empathy, you know."

The youngster shuddered. "No loss."

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"No loss," repeated Torth. "And then the reason for invasion was removed, and no one bothered to use the machine again, and no one will."

"That was when the molds came?"

"Yes, the molds. Just as we came out of space so long ago, as crystalline spores, so these molds arrived on Titan. At that time, you know, we possessed all Titans and reproduced faster than they did. We had to expand."

"It is not so now," said the youngster with confidence.

"No," said Torth. "Happily, no. The products of the molds—and the molds grow profusely here—worked miracles with the metabolism of our hosts. They reproduce faster and they live longer."

"And will they never overpopulate Titan?"

"Not in our time, not in any predictable time. Titan can support billions of the little creatures, and there are only a few thousand today. The rate of increase is not that great. Just great enough to give us, who are parasites, sufficient hosts."

"And—what happened to Eudiche?"

* * *

"HE DIED," said Vaughn. Her voice was shocked, distraught in the cold dawn.

"He had to die," said Dran sorrowfully. "His synthesis was complete in us three. His consistency was as complete. His recognition of the right to life gave him no alternative. He saved his own race on its own terms, and saved—spared, rather—spared us on human terms. He found what we were, and he loved it. Had he stayed here, he and his progeny and his kind would have destroyed the thing he loved. So he died."

The grey light warmed as they started down the hill, and then the dawn came crashing up in one great crescendo of color, obliterating its pink prelude and establishing the theme for the sun's gaudy entrance. Drunk with its light, three people crossed the frozen brook and came to the edge of the road.

At last Manuel spoke. "What have we got here?"

Dran looked at the satchels, at Vaughn, at Manuel. "What have you got?"

Manuel kicked his foot locker. "I've got the beginnings of a space drive. You've got a whole new direction in biological chemistry. Runt— Oh my God, will you look at that face. I know—poems."

"Poems," she whispered, and smiled. The dawn had not been like that smile.

The taxi came. They loaded their cases in and sat very close together in the back.

"No one of us will ever be greater than any other," Dran said after a time. "We three have a life, not lives. I don't know anything yet about the details of our living, except that they will violate nothing."

Vaughn looked into Manuel's face, and into Dran's. Then she chuckled, "Which means I'll probably marry Joe."

They were very close. Dran again broke the silence. "My next book will be my best. It will have this dedication:

"What Vaughn inspires, I design, and Manuel builds."

And so it came about.

Poor Joe.

THE END

VIKINGS REPULSE MARTIAN ATTACK!

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Out of these deadly crystals came a new meaning to life....

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By Raymond F. Jones

They sought refuge from the sun's deadly rays in peaceful Crystal Valley. But then Dawson found that death has a peculiar way of asserting its own life

THE GREAT, blue-white sun of Donophan 1210 was no more than a half million miles away. In her monstrous field of gravitation, the luxury yacht *Westphalia* wallowed drunkenly. Light pressure and cyclonic whorls of radioactive particles spun the ship in defiance of the atomic piles deep in her slim belly.

Like a battered sailing vessel on ancient seas of Earth, she twisted and rolled under the buffeting of photons and the blast of shattered elements torn from the great sun.

On her bridge, the Master of the *Westphalia* watched the meters with grave anxiety. Captain Dawson had been in space for thirty-five of his fifty years, but he'd never driven a vessel deliberately into such a treacherous path as this. And he did not do it now of his own free will.

On every ship before this one, his title as Captain had meant that he was the master of the ship under his command. For twenty years he had been on the bridge of an Earth-Mars luxury liner. But liner captains had mandatory retirement at the age of fifty-five, and a chicken farm was not for men like him.

Upon retirement, they had only one recourse—the Gold Plate Fleet, the private yachts owned by those who could afford them.

He lifted his cap to wipe the moist center of his pate and the neatly trimmed fringe of gray hair that bordered it. He mopped the back of his neck and his face that was flushed with the heat to a far deeper hue than its normal healthy pink tinge.

But he left his coat and tie undisturbed in military precision, although he had long ago allowed his officers and crewmen to remove theirs.

Beside him, Jenkins, the First Mate, stood at the port watching the giant sun. It was technically known as a white dwarf. Jenkins wondered absently if the man who had coined that term had ever been this close to one.

"We've got to pull out," said Dawson. "It was an insane idea to cut in this close. Take over the bridge. Tell the pilot to pull away. Get Navigator Hill on the search course for that dreamed-up planet of Canby's. I'm going back to the deck."

Jenkins nodded and saluted smartly

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—and hopefully. He doubted, however, that even the threat of disaster would win willing permission to take the ship out of the sun's terrible field. Gold Platers were that crazy.

The Captain moved slowly along the corridor that traversed the length of the ship on the side away from the sun. Even here he could feel the intense heat. The metal of the walls, and the steel plates of the floor beneath his feet radiated with a fury all their own. Silently, he gave vent to a fierce hope that the Phillipses and their guests were being thoroughly stewed in their own juices—all except George. George Phillips, at least, was a decent character. If he only had the guts to tell off those Women of his....

IN THE semi-darkness of the space-side corridor, Dawson thought he was alone—until he nearly bumped into the paunchy figure of the ship's owner.

George Phillips was standing by a port, gazing out into the starry depths. The glow of his cigar was about the brightness of a nova in the starfield.

"I'm sorry, I didn't see you standing there," apologized Dawson. "I was on my way back to the lounge to look for you. We've got to pull out."

Phillips straightened up, tugging at the shorts, his only garment, which clung miraculously to the lower slope of his paunch.

"As bad as that?" he said.

"If we stayed another half hour. I couldn't accept responsibility for what might happen. The screens and coolers are working at top load. If any part of it goes out, we'll be fried fish before we can even turn the ship away."

"Canby says he'll be through in just a couple more hours," said Phillips weakly. He wiped the rolling sweat from his brow and sat on the leather-upholstered seat by the port. "Can't we stick it out that much longer?"

"Do you want to?"

"Hell, no! This wasn't my idea—frying in our own grease just so that crazy artist can paint a picture of that sun at close range. It's even crazier than that Crystal of Life idea of his that brought us out here."

Dawson sat beside George. "It isn't my place," he said slowly, "to try to tell you how to run your affairs. I'm just hired to pilot this piece of gold plate of yours, and maybe you know what you're doing. But if I were you, I'd lock up those Women of yours and throw Roal Canby into solitary while we take off for cooler spots in the universe."

Phillips sighed. "I wish I could, but you don't know how it is, Tom. Forty-five years ago, I might have had a chance, but it didn't seem worth the effort then. My hands were full with business matters. Sandra was on her own. She ran the household and reared the girls to be carbon copies of herself, and they all hate my guts—except Irene. She's pure gold. They couldn't do anything to her.

"Now, I'm too old to kick up much of a fuss. I've got most of my money where they can't get their hands on it, which fact is my own personal life insurance. Otherwise, I'd probably wake up with my throat cut one of these days."

Captain Dawson mentally agreed. He was sure it wasn't beyond Sandra Phillips' capacity to murder her husband, if she thought it would be to her advantage.

There were times when he regretted his own life of bachelorhood, but this was not one of them.

He liked the quiet, unassuming George Phillips. As an interplanetary industrialist, the man had done much to push civilization outward from the

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Solar System. His company had been chiefly responsible for setting up the giant bases which were the stepping stones to outer space. And, if Phillips had acquired a few hundred millions in his own coffers during the process, Tom Dawson was not one to envy him.

He would not have traded one hour of his life for all of Phillips' possessions—including the Women. The Captain had spent his own life almost exactly as he had wished, and more than that he felt a man could not have. He had gone to space before he was twenty. He had been Master of the Earth-Mars luxury run for longer than he'd had a right to expect. He had seen deep space often enough to satisfy the most primitive longings, and he had a good berth now.

THE GOLD PLATE FLEET often involved unpleasant setups for men who were used to the order and precision of the commercial ships, but Tom Dawson had been happy to sign on with George Phillips. He had become acquainted with the industrialist ten years before on a Mars trip, and their friendship had been mutual and firm.

But Phillips' family, Dawson could not endure. The Women, as George called them. Mrs. Phillips, and her two older daughters, Anya and Roene, were stinkers by any definition. Only the youngest, Irene, had any of the serene qualities of her father.

On this trip, the Women had invited numerous in-laws and assorted socialites of their own sophisticated breed. For their pet, they had the artist, Roal Canby.

Canby was an extra special screwball in his own right. He had persuaded them in setting the goal for this trip to follow a rumor that he'd nursed for twenty years of his life, the rumor of a fountain of youth and immortality in the fabulous Crystal Valley of Donophan's lone planet—a planet not even recorded on any star chart of which Dawson knew.

It was just the kind of insane thing to appeal to the wealthy socialites to fill their useless lives. No one believed in Canby's story, of course, but it made good talk and gave some point to their generally purposeless cruising.

Canby had obtained the location coordinates of the place, finally, in some Martian dive five years before. It was evident to Captain Dawson that his persuasion of the Phillips Women was the end result of a long and carefully planned campaign. George Phillips, now retired, was just along for the ride. And he was getting one, thought Dawson.

No chart showed any planet at all for the star, Donophan 1210. But it was not for Dawson to question, if the Phillipses wished to search a couple of trillion cubic miles of space in a vain hunt for the supposed planet.

He gave directions to intersect the coordinates on Canby's secret map. Then, the artist got the crazy notion of painting the dwarf star at close range. Telescopic observation would not do—would not convey the proper "emotion" that he had to feel. When the order came to dive in close to the star, Dawson fondly considered the merits of the White Leghorn.

"Somebody's going to murder somebody before this trip is over," said George moodily staring at the unfamiliar constellations. "I can feel it in my bones."

Dawson could understand such a feeling. He would have liked to put his own hands around the throat of Mrs. Phillips and of her oldest daughter, Anya.

"It's the heat," he said. "This is enough to make anyone feel like cut-

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ting somebody's throat. Let's go on back to the lounge and explain the situation to the Women."

"It won't do any good. Roal Canby might as well be owner and captain of this ship for all of you and me."

"There are laws of space, which demand that a captain protect his charges. We can invoke them, because it's come to a point of safety now."

"And then I'll have to fire you," said George sadly. "The Women will make me get a new master as soon as we touch the next Terrestrian port."

Dawson stifled the retort that sprang up in his throat. He admitted that he did not know what it was like to live for forty-five years with any kind of woman, let alone one like Sandra Phillips. But he still could not imagine how anyone could reduce an industrial giant like George Phillips to such submissiveness. Yet, he was seeing it, and he didn't like what he saw. He thanked the stars of the universe all over again for his own bachelorhood.

THEY CAME into the lounge. There was no activity whatever. In the baking atmosphere, the Phillips Women, husbands, in-laws, and guests sprawled in utter exhaustion on the divans and on the floor.

Dawson glanced at the thermometer on the wall. It stood at a hundred and twenty-one. Even with the humidity at a negligible one or two per cent, it was unbearable.

All the men were dressed like George Phillips, in shorts. The women were as nude as the law would allow —and it was very lenient at this distance from home, Dawson noted distastefully.

He approached the lounge where Mrs. Phillips sat dejectedly watching the stars slowly wheel across the ports.

She was as scantily clad as the younger women. Her aged, neglected body was revolting. Its middle-aged obesity was just beginning to give way to the shrunken shapelessness of true old age. Her hair, a steely gray, ordinarily expensively coifed, hung in damp sparse strings.

"How do you do, Captain?" she said. "I should think your own regulations would at least permit you to remove your coat in this inferno. You make me uncomfortable just watching you."

Dawson refrained from explaining how she affected him. "We're turning the ship aside," he said. "Our machinery is burdened beyond any reasonable safety factor. For your own protection, we must retreat from Donophan. We shall go on to search for Canby's planet, but this dangerous point of observation must positively be abandoned."

The old woman rose with an incredible burst of energy. "Mister Dawson—! Your commission is to take this vessel wherever Mr. Phillips designates. You are not paid to determine where or when those objectives are to be abandoned."

She turned furiously to her husband. "Was it not clearly understood that we were to proceed to Crystal Valley by means of a route that would permit Mr. Canby to observe the star at his convenience?"

"Yes, of course..." said George miserably. "But—"

"Then you will carry out your instructions, Captain Dawson. We will notify you when we are no longer able to endure this discomfort.

"You are a man of machines and cold calculation, Captain. I'm quite sure that you are incapable of understanding the superb emotions aroused in the breast of a great creator like Mr. Canby, who is undertaking to

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record this supreme experience on canvas in a way that will convey a similar emotion to other sensitive souls. The rest of us are willing to participate to this extent in this exquisite moment of creation.

"You are not required to understand. You are paid to pilot this ship as directed."

Captain Dawson breathed deeply of the hot, dry air to make sure that he had full control of his voice.

"In the interests of safety—" he began.

He never finished. From down the corridor on the sunward side of the ship came a sudden, sharp scream. He recognized the shrill, wild voice of Anya.

"Help—oh, come here quickly—" Her cry was broken by the sound of heavy steps and a sharp crash.

Captain Dawson reached the door before any of the reclining guests had fully stirred. But the ship's doctor, Bronson, was already racing from the other direction. He disappeared into the door of the lounge that had been set aside as Roal Canby's studio.

DAWSON burst into the big, bare room where the huge observation port already showed the star swinging sternward as the ship turned.

Artist Roal Canby was on the floor. Doctor Bronson was helping him raise his head from a pool of his own blood.

Alone against the far wall stood Anya. To Dawson, her face had always seemed hard, its bitterness intensified by her frantic struggle with the years to keep them from thrusting her into the outstretched arms of middle age. Now, rage seemed to have tempered her countenance anew. Her fists clenched and her whole body was tensed, catlike.

Also apart, was Millar Croatan, Anya's husband. He was a very competent vice-president of the vast Phillips enterprises. His eyes glared unblinkingly at the fallen artist, his fists hard and defiant.

Fluttering between them, as she came suddenly into the room, Sandra Phillips screamed and threw her hands about hysterically. Dawson advanced and took her firmly by the arm.

"I'm sure that you would help Dr. Bronson," he said, "and make it easier for Mr. Canby, if you would sit over here quietly, Mrs. Phillips."

Her eyes were like a lizard's, he thought, bright and hard, and swinging upon him in the surrounding wrinkled, baggy skin.

"Please, Captain!"

But she went to the seat he indicated, and remained silent, in spite of the bitter glare at his interruption of her histrionics.

Dawson moved to Bronson's side. "Can I be of any help?"

"No, I think not. It's nothing serious. A cut lip and a loose tooth or two, but nothing more."

The Captain then approached Millar Croatan, who hadn't moved, whose eyes seemed unable to shift from the figure of the artist.

"What happened?" said Dawson. "It may be necessary to put you under arrest, if charges are placed, or if you assaulted Canby with a weapon."

"You don't need any weapon but these on something like him!" Millar raised a thick, hard fist and caressed it with the palm of his other hand. "His glass jaw just happened to get in the way of my fist. That's all."

"Happened!"

For a moment, Dawson thought Mrs. Phillips had taken up her screaming again, but he turned and saw that it was Anya bearing down on them this time.

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"You came in here like a madman," she cried, "and you struck him without a warning. It was only an accident that you didn't kill him. That's what you meant to do!"

"Maybe you're right," said Millar evenly. "It's a cinch that's what I'll do next time, if I ever catch you sitting around naked with that phony artist again."

Scantily clad as the other women, Anya flushed. "You filthy thing!" she screamed at him.

CAPTAIN DAWSON raised his voice above the babble of sound that swelled from the quarrelling Phillips and the excited guests. "I suggest that all of you had best return to the lounge to avoid further discomforts to Mr. Canby, and avert a continuance of this unpleasantness. With your approval, of course, Mr. Phillips."

George Phillips caught the mention of his name. He nodded his head automatically. "Of course. Of course, by all means, Captain!"

The reluctant movement of those nearest the door gave him encouragement, and he advanced to lead them out.

When they were all gone, Dawson remained with Doctor Bronson and Canby. The artist was sitting up now on his drawing bench, his eyes staring at the bloody spot on the floor.

"You'll be all right, fella," said Bronson. "But I think we'd better get you down to the dispensary and finish the clean-up and look more closely at those cuts."

"I'm all right," the artist snarled. "Just let me alone—"

Then, he seemed to become aware of the changed position of the sun. "We're moving!" he cried. "We're moving away—my painting—What have you done? I demand you swing the ship back to the orbit!"

"Sorry," said Dawson. "The machinery was strained to the limit. I could not allow the ship to remain that close any longer."

As if it were some lost paradise that was slipping forever beyond his reach, the artist watched the slowly shrinking disc of the dwarf sun.

Then, he turned upon Captain Dawson, his mouth warped in rage. "Damn you! Damn you! I hate the guts of every one of you, you filthy, moneyed scum!"

They had told him it would be like this, Captain Dawson thought as he strode back to the bridge. All his friends at Terrestrian Space Lines had warned that he would be better off if he settled down somewhere on a small chicken farm for the rest of his life, instead of riding the Gold Plate Fleet.

From every part of the universe, retired commercial men brought back tales of the screwball goings-on that took place aboard those ships.

He wondered if any of them could top the *Westphalia*. It looked as if everybody aboard the ship hated everybody else—including himself. Anya and Mrs. Phillips had a very special brew of animosity for him and, while he was ordinarily a peaceful person who loved his fellow men, he would gladly have pushed them through an open hatch if he thought he could get away with it.

George Phillips was thoroughly despised by his wife and two older daughters, and he had long ago given up fighting back at them.

Anya was playing around with Roal Canby, which made a neat, three-cornered row with her husband Millar. The middle daughter, Roene, had her fourth husband Omar aboard, and he was already straying in the direction of Irene—who rebuffed him in a very unPhillips-like manner.

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CAPTAIN DAWSON hung up his cap and sank down in the chair behind the Master's desk. The animosities worried him. If anything serious happened, it would reflect on him as well as on the Phillips family. In the eyes of fellow spacemen, he was responsible for anything that occurred on his ship.

He had a good record, and even if he was retired from commercial runs, he didn't want it marred by some family row aboard a Gold Plater. As much as he liked George Phillips personally, it would be impossible to remain. He'd have to turn in his folio the next time they touched home port. Maybe that chicken ranch wouldn't look so bad, after all.

In the meantime, there was this cruise to finish—without somebody killing somebody, as George had prophesied.

He checked the log and called the navigator.

The officer was a trim-looking youngster named Ralph Hill. He was on his first trip. Ordinarily, a man didn't start out on the Gold Plate Fleet. Times were tough, however, in some technical grades, and Hill had been glad to get on the *Westphalia* after stewing around the commercial yards for more than six months after getting his ticket.

Captain Dawson acknowledged his salute and offered a chair. "You heard about the fuss a few minutes ago? I'd like to set down if we can and let some of these Gold Platers work off some energy outside instead of beating up each other. How long will it take now to check Canby's location of this supposed planet, so that we can get on to some place that is real and half civilized?"

The navigator pushed a clip board across the desk. "I worked it up as soon as you ordered the change of course. About forty-eight hours, allowing for a suitable distance at which to swing around the sun."

Dawson nodded approvingly. "Good work. Thanks. That's all. And—ah, Hill, I'm turning in my folio when we reach home deck. I thought you might like to know. Your reputation's in a more critical stage than mine—or any of the rest of us superannuants."

THE OFFICER turned, hesitated, then spoke: "I wish you wouldn't sir, if you don't mind my saying it. I think you're badly needed here. I think George—Mr. Phillips needs you."

Dawson looked up in astonishment. "What is your interest in this particular Gold Plate outfit?"

Hill flushed. "I've become rather well acquainted with Miss Phillips—Irene. She's very decent, and she says often that you're her father's only friend, almost. He speaks often of it."

"I see—I see. Well, thanks—"

"Thank you, sir." Hill saluted smartly and left.

Dawson smiled as the navigator went out. It was pleasant to see youngsters in love. He hoped Hill made out with Irene. She was the only one of the Phillips tribe that was worth a damn, beside her father, of course.

There was nothing humorous about the implied obligation to George Phillips. He didn't owe the man anything, he thought, and he couldn't afford to ride a Gold Plate ship carrying the potential explosive that the Phillips Women represented.

Or could he?

He remembered the poker games, the long talks, the quiet exchange of confidences between him and George on those long nights between Earth and Mars.

He wondered how many men George could call friend. On his own

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social level, he did not have friends; he had acquaintances and business associates—rivals who would stab in the back for a buck. He didn't gather friends there.

To hell with it, Dawson thought. George was his friend as well as his employer, and a man's friendship was worth more than a technical reputation. Ralph and Irene would be needing help, too. Ma Phillips would blow up a major hurricane when she got wind of their intentions. A navigator didn't have the social position and sophistication she'd demand of a Phillips son-in-law.

TWENTY-FOUR hours later, Dawson and George were in the office just off the bridge when the lookout exclaimed his find. The Captain went quickly to the radar scope, then took up a small glass. He picked out the tiny, glistening speck that was as bright as a dime store ring in the blazing light of Donophan 1210.

He handed the glass to George slowly. "I wouldn't have believed it! I didn't think we'd find a damn thing on this goose chase that Canby has led."

"But now that we have, I wonder what else we'll find."

"Well, not the crystal of youth and immortality that Canby claims, surely," Dawson laughed. "The story has got to break down somewhere. If it doesn't, just think of your Women becoming immortal and young!"

George didn't laugh, and something about his face made Dawson feel suddenly ashamed. George was wistful.

"It might not be so bad—if they became young as well as immortal. Sandra was decent when she was young. I was in love with her, and she loved me then. After you've gone over your life once and look back, it does make you want to go over it again and see if you couldn't make it work out somehow.

"If I were a youngster just starting out again, I'd say to hell with ninety per cent of what I thought was important then. I'd pay attention to Sandra, and we'd keep our love instead of letting it turn so sour. But you don't think that's possible, do you?"

"I don't know. I never stayed in one place long enough to find a girl when I was young."

"It can be done," George said soberly. "I know it can. Sandra and I could have done it. Even Anya was a good kid when she was young. She needn't have become such a bitch as she turned out to be. Irene won't be that way, though. She and Ralph know what is important. They won't get sidetracked like the rest of us. I've watched them."

"I didn't even know you knew about them."

"Give me some credit! I may knuckle under to the Women, but I'm not a complete damn fool!"

THEY INVITED Roal Canby to the bridge to view the planet and make suggestions for landing. He had secret information which he refused to discuss with anyone until they found the place.

Now, he came up, a thin, nervous man with a sparse mustache and eyes that darted suspiciously from point to point and from person to person.

"That's it—just like it was described to me." He breathed heavily with excitement as he looked down upon the world to which he had led them.

"It's in a valley, a narrow valley in crystal mountains, the only place of its kind on the whole planet. We'll know it when we see it, because all the rest is broken up like shards of glass. Just this one long valley is

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surrounded by unbroken peaks of crystal."

There was a fanatic urgency in the man's eyes that made Dawson uneasy. The artist really believed that down there he would find an actual Crystal of Life. He had overstepped the narrow line that bounded the world of reality.

But he must have the story from some authentic source, Dawson admitted. The ship was moving west above the sunlit side of the planet, and through the telescopes it looked like a vast field of broken glass. Everywhere was the shattered crystalline structure, and nowhere was there evidence of other formations.

"It's a silicone world," offered Canby in explanation. "No carbon. Nothing but silicone structures. Even the life forms."

"How can there be life down there?" snapped Dawson, more sharply than he intended.

"You'll see," said Canby.

"It's a barren looking place," said George. "The Women won't like it. They thought they were coming to some place full of streams and lakes."

"Like they could have seen if they had stayed on Earth?"

"I guess so. The farther out we get, the more they want to see something that looks like home. You can't figure them out."

"But they like jewelry?"

"It flows in their veins."

"Look. They'll like that, then." Dawson pointed ahead through the port.

There rose slowly against the black sky of the planet a jeweled fringe like some incredible tiara at the horizon. The reflections of a million perfect facets were secondary only to the brilliance of the blue white sun itself.

"Incredible!" breathed Phillips. "It almost makes you feel as if you have no right to set foot on such a place as that."

"Almost..." murmured Dawson. But the Women and their guests would have no such hesitancy, he knew. Their sensitive souls would not quail before the possibility of picking up something that might be a real gem stone.

"It's the place!" cried Canby. "That's Crystal Valley in those mountains, just the way he told me...."

TO ACCOMODATE the entire passenger list, it was decided to divide the group into three successive exploring parties. The first list out was finally settled to include Captain Dawson, the Phillipses, and the husbands of Anya and Roene. Roal Canby, of course, was to guide them according to the legend he possessed. Dawson selected for his own assistant Hill, the navigator, because of Irene.

The list was chiefly the work, of course, of Sandra Phillips. George brought it up to the bridge, and Dawson okayed it with a nod.

"Tell them to get down to the lock and start putting on the suits. Jenkins will supervise and check the dressing. Hill, you go along with Mr. Phillips and help."

"Yes, sir. And...uh...thanks for allowing me to go along." The navigator paused long enough to speak the words to Dawson.

"I don't know much about these things, but it could be a place for you and Irene to remember," said the Captain.

"It will, sir. It will."

Dawson turned again to the port to watch the landing. The world below them was a land of shattering contrasts. The sky was of the utter blackness of space except for the blazing sun. From every facet of the planet, the blinding reflections of

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Donophan shone.

The ship arced down in a long glide, the braking beams slowing its swift fall. Straight ahead was the narrow mouth of the long twisting canyon called Crystal Valley. In it alone there seemed to be order among all the crystal chaos. Jagged peaks rose hundreds of feet above the valley floor. Their irregularity was the disorder of perfect crystals set neatly against one another as if by some child of a giant race. Or, more nearly still, it resembled the skyline of some fantastic fairy city where the inhabitants were creatures of light who could flow in and out of their crystal dwellings with the ease of sunbeams.

Abruptly, the flowing, hypnotic motion of the landscape ceased. With only a gentle roll, the ship came to rest at the mouth of the valley. Swiftly, the pilot cut the great engines and secured the landing clamps.

"Mr. Jenkins will be in charge," Dawson said. He turned to the communications officer. "Leave channel four open. We will call in should there be any possible emergency. We should be gone no more than three hours. If we are not back by then, call us for a check."

He went down to the dressing rooms adjacent to the air lock leading to the exterior. Most of the party had completed dressing and were being checked by the crewman in charge of the suits, and by Jenkins.

"We've found there is not a vacuum as we supposed," said Jenkins. "There's pressure out there. The planet has an atmosphere."

"How could the sky be so black, then? Lack of dust—a perfect gas without dispersing particles. That would be possible on such a place as this, I suppose. What's the gas?"

"Mostly nitrogen and argon. Nothing breathable."

Dawson donned his own suit quickly. He switched on the suit communicator and checked the circuits and channels with the attendants.

THE FIRST MATE saluted as the party moved into the lock. While they waited for the chamber to be exhausted to conserve the oxygen supply, Dawson heard the grumbling chatter of his charges. Mrs. Phillips' suit didn't fit. Anya felt positively stifled in hers. Beside her, Millar cast dour glances at the artist, Canby, and complained of the unpleasant humidity of his air supply. Canby moaned the complaint that the face piece of the helmet distorted his vision so that he would lose emotional perspective of the crystal world.

The artist was laden with a kit of sketch materials, and the rest carried photo equipment and specimen bags, just like tourists anywhere. It looked like a good time would be had by all, thought Dawson—if somebody didn't kill somebody before they got back.

The outer door opened suddenly and the alien gas sucked into the chamber. The party jumped clumsily to the surface of the crystal planet.

"Why can't we have some steps, George?" complained Mrs. Phillips.

"I'll see to it," said George absently, but he was not paying attention to his complaining, demanding spouse.

He was staring up at the distant, glistening mountains, the fairy city, against the ebony sky. The awesome scene made them all stop for an instant, forgetting their submerged bitterness and imperious demanding. For once, even Sandra Phillips was stopped by something she could neither understand nor command.

It made her uneasy to be aware of such awe within her. "Well, Captain, let's be off," she demanded brusquely.

"At once," he said. "And may I caution all of you to watch your foot-

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ing. This stuff we're walking on is like ground glass, but almost as hard as diamond. It could rip the fabric of a suit."

They trudged on with cautious, exaggerated steps like men walking in deep snow. Occasionally, there was a pause to point a camera lens. Canby had a sketch book in hand and jabbed furiously at it as he walked, even though his hands were cased in the thick gloves of the spacesuit.

From Millar and Anya, there was no conversation. They walked apart as if afraid to touch. Ralph and Irene did not walk near enough to disturb Mrs. Phillips, but they had switched to a private frequency on their suit radios. It could not be overheard by the others—only by Dawson, who knew how to tune to it. He listened unashamedly to their chatter, because it was the only pleasant sound available.

Abruptly, Anya cried out in her shrill, unpleasant voice: "Something moved! There's something alive up there!"

Dawson's eyes had been on the high, crystal peaks, but he quickly shifted his glance in the direction of Anya's pointing finger. There, between boulder-like masses of broken crystal, he saw the faintly moving figures.

So much like their environment that they could scarcely be seen against the background, the figures defied his vision. He was aware of movement, of abrupt, blinding reflections that shimmered and died. But he could not make out the shape or size of the thing that moved.

"Wait here," he commanded.

"I'm going with you," said Canby. "These things are harmless. I've seen old timers who've talked with them."

"Come on." Dawson didn't know how far he was going to have to believe this fantastic story of Canby's, but there was little point in arguing with the artist now.

They advanced together. Dawson had not considered it necessary to bring weapons. Now, he almost wished that he had.

He spoke quickly into the transmitter, switching to the ship frequency: "Jenkins?"

"Yes, sir."

"Can you spot the movement ahead of us? Maybe you can see it with the telescope better than we can here. Something that may be alive up ahead. Get ready to cover the party, if necessary."

"I can see them. They're crystal like the rest of the place. They've got a sort of anthropomorphic form with crazy, articulated arms and leg joints. Something that looks like a head is composed of one huge crystal. There's—"

"Yes! I can see them now. They're coming towards us. Four of them."

The crystomorphs advanced without dissimulation. There was grace in their movements, where there might have been ludicrous stiltedness. With the smoothness of exquisitely trained muscles, the impulse of motion traveled the length of those crystal limbs, and the creatures walked forward with beauty and rhythm.

They stopped a dozen feet from the two Earthmen. Then, one advanced alone. "I am Kor Remy," it said. "I speak your language from the thoughts of your own brain."

"Telepathic pickup," murmured Canby. "That's the way he told me it was done. They can speak the language of any creature they happen to be near."

IN TWENTY years, Dawson had become so used to concourse with Martians and the Venusian tribes, that he had come to think of them as only slightly variant members of the

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human race. He had forgotten the feel of meeting with the other vastly alien forms of life that spacemen encountered.

The feeling returned now with all the uncertainty, the fumbling of thought, and the instinctive fear that he had known when he was young. He was thankful for the linguistic abilities of the crystomorphs. It spared him the difficult task of sign language communications. This had been worked out by ethnographers to an exact science, but he had forgotten most of what he ever knew of it.

"We are of another world, called Earth," he said simply. "We have come to visit and to look upon your world. Will you grant us the privilege?"

"You do us the honor," replied Kor Remy. "We have had others from your world, but they have not come for a long time. Follow us, and we will show you Crystal Valley."

He turned to lead off at a fast pace, then paused in curious hesitation. He turned to his fellow creatures, counting slowly.

"Four of us," he murmured.

Dawson watched the crystal head that gleamed like a miniature sun. He would not have offered a guess as to how that voice was produced, yet it did not seem incredible. The high pitched, singing tones were in keeping with the crystalline structure. It was not hard to imagine them being generated by some single, specialized crystal.

But now the crystomorph was counting the Earthmen. "Nine of you," it said. "There should be nine of us."

"Why is that?" asked Dawson.

"Always there is one of us for one of you. Now, five are gone." He turned to the mountains and looked up. "I see them now, hiding and watching. This thing has not happened before."

Dawson looked up at the distant cliffs. He could not see the figures that Kor Remy said were there. "Perhaps they do not approve. It is best that we go no further if there is danger that we do sacrilege to your homes."

"No—no, there is no objection. You must come."

THE FOUR moved away, not looking back. The rest of his companions crowded about Dawson.

"They're amusing creatures," said Mrs. Phillips. "Just think what it would be like to have one of them back home."

"Do you think it's safe, sir?" asked Hill. "Perhaps we should not risk it without weapons."

"We'll follow them a short distance. Kor Remy seemed open enough, but I don't like the business of his five companions hanging back, as if we had caused a schism in the group. We might find ourselves in the middle of a nasty family row if we aren't careful."

"Of course we will go on!" exclaimed Canby. "This is what we came for. We should have asked them about the Crystal of Life—"

"I'll do the talking," Dawson reminded him sharply. "We'll mention no such thing until we understand their actions better."

The artist made no reply, but Dawson knew that he was ready to bolt—perhaps dangerously—if he took it into his head to do so. He recognized no authority but his own wild will.

Dawson sighed to himself. He had no business to be herding this tribe of Gold Platers around on some alien planet looking for a fountain of youth. He must be as crazy as they were....

He moved on to catch up with the

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retreating crystomorphs. They advanced between the arms of the mountains which rose sharply on either side of them, enfolding them like some cruel and brittle mother.

They lost sight of the *Westphalia* as the pathway turned. The direct light of the sun vanished, too, but the walls on either side of them seemed to come alive with a light of their own. The sun's rays touched the peaks of the great crystals that towered above and flowed downward to the floor of the valley. It seemed as if the Earthlings were walking in a world of light that shimmered and vibrated with a life of its own.

And then they heard the singing.

Canby heard it first, stopped short, his head lifted as if his whole body were impelled towards the sound.

"What is that?" cried Mrs. Phillips. In her voice, there was an edge of terror for that which she did not understand, and which was too exquisite for her to endure.

"Vibrations set up in the crystal," said Hill. His hand clutched Irene's now, the bulky gloves of their suits their only barrier. "I wonder if that could be dangerous. All those shards back there—broken, shattered crystal."

CAPTAIN DAWSON looked up and about anxiously to the peaks of the towering walls of light. There was no one source for the musical notes that swelled about them. As if each of ten thousand crystals struck its own unique note, the sound swelled and rolled in mighty, harmonious chords and flowed down the narrow defile, a river of shimmering sound.

"It's wonderful!" Irene breathed. "It's almost enough to hypnotize you and make you want to stay here to listen to it forever."

It was, Dawson thought, and the idea sent a small, faint chill through him. Venusians he could take, and Martians were his friends, but he was past all ability to account for the fantastic, singing crystomorphs. Their music was ominous, and the threat of being caught in some internecine brawl did not appeal. If this were old age, anyone could make the most they cared to of it, he thought.

"We'll go back," he said. "Before we venture in here on foot, we'll have a survey made from a life craft. There's no use—"

"We'll go on!" shouted Canby. "I'm going to know the meaning of the Crystal of Life. I haven't come across two galaxies and reached this close to turn back now. I'm going on!"

He turned and raced along the defile, past even the waiting crystomorphs, who had turned to watch the Earthlings.

"Come back, you damned fool!" Dawson commanded.

But Canby, already out of sight around a sharp turn, made no answer on the suit communicator.

The Captain turned to Hill. "You see the party back to the ship. I'll go on after that crazy fool."

Reluctantly, the others turned, their eyes irresistibly turning to the peaks that seemed to rest against the night-black sky. The singing thunder of the high pitched chords was swelling and falling, and surging up again in a secondary rhythm of its own.

Suddenly, Irene screamed and pointed to the towering crystals a little way beyond, towards the mouth of the defile.

Dawson gasped. A trio of delicate minarets was shattering. Splinters were dropping away to the valley floor. Then, as they watched in horror, the whole structure swayed towards the defile through which they had come.

Like a bright ice fall, it caught the

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sun for an instant and shimmered down, ten thousand splintered knives that crashed to the bottom with a wailing echo of sound that rolled up and down the length of the canyon until it died away and left them in deathly silence.

"Let's get out of here!" screamed Anya. "The whole place will be toppling down on us!"

"You cannot go back." Kor Remy was suddenly beside them. "My brothers mean for you not to go back. I do not understand."

THE SOUND began anew, so faintly that it was scarcely heard, a single note as of a plucked string. It broke the silence, and was joined by another, and then two more, until all that wild sound beat down upon them again.

Pleasant no longer, it was the sound of death as they stared at the high crystal walls that a song could shatter.

"They are up there," said Kor Remy. "They sing to bring death. They have closed the entrance by which you came. You cannot go back."

"We'll get Jenkins to pick us up in one of the life craft," said Dawson. He switched to the ship's frequency, and called.

"Jenkins, send a life craft over the valley. We're trapped by a rock fall at the mouth of the canyon."

He waited. No answering assurance came through the phones.

"Jenkins! Dawson calling the *Westphalia*. Can you hear me? Come in!"

Hill was listening. He looked up into the Captain's face with a start. "It's dead. It must be these crystal walls. They won't let anything through. We've got to have line of sight transmission around this stuff!"

"You're right." Dawson turned again to the crystomorph. "Is there a way out of the valley at the other end? Is there any other way out?"

"Way out? Yes, there is a way to escape all that endangers and troubles you. The Crystal of Life."

The phrase, which they had heard so often from the lips of Canby, struck Dawson with a shock of disbelief. But there was not time to question that mystery now.

"We want a way back to our ship," he said. "We don't care about any crystal. We want to find a way out of this valley."

"You must follow us. We will show you the crystal." He glanced upward once more. "I don't understand that you should wish to die...."

"What did he mean by that?" George asked as Kor Remy turned away.

"I don't know. Their mental processes make no sense whatever."

"Why couldn't one of us get across the barrier? It might be possible to get in sight of the ship—"

"You couldn't get over that pile of razor sharp fragments. You'd sink into it and it would cut your suit to ribbons."

Hill pointed suddenly to the towers straight above as the music swelled in terrifying crescendo. "Look out!"

He jerked Irene roughly, running towards the upper part of the canyon.

THE OTHERS followed his glance of terror and saw a mountainous mass of crystal breaking directly above them. Showers of preliminary fragments beat down, slashing dangerously at their suits.

"Run! Get going!" roared Dawson.

He cursed their stupid frozen terror, and it broke the spell. They ran, and behind them the mass crashed where they had stood, filling the defile with murderous fragments. It built a wall a hundred feet high, sealing them forever from the way by

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which they had come.

There was fascination in staring at the death that they had missed. The light from the walls transmitted itself through the heap of rubble until the mass glowed as if hot fires burned in its midst.

But there was no warmth in that light. It was cold and bitter like the black sky above, and ominous—like the new, swelling song that began to beat against their ears.

Mrs. Phillips broke. She screamed suddenly at Dawson. "You brought us in here to die. You've got to find a way out! Make them let us go!"

Dawson looked on up the defile where Canby and the crystomorphs had disappeared. He looked towards the heights, trying to spot the creatures Kor Remy had said were bent on destroying them. He could make out nothing against the walls of light. He wondered, too, what the crystomorph had meant by saying he could not understand why the Earthlings should wish to die. None of it made any sense whatever.

"We may as well go on up further," he said. "There's nothing to be gained here, and we may find another opening or a spot where the walls can be scaled."

They followed him in fear and unwillingness, but the mere act of moving freed them from some of the terror and the hysteria.

The crystomorphs seemed utterly stupid, Dawson thought as he walked. Kor Remy appeared to have no comprehension of the urgency of the Earthlings' escape from the canyon. He was merely mildly puzzled by the action of his companions on the crystal crags. Neither had he expressed any enmity of his own. He was simply puzzled—and otherwise indifferent.

There was no sign of artifacts or habitation. Nothing would indicate that this was an inhabited planet—except the presence of the crystomorphs themselves.

Dawson doubted seriously if they were even alive, really. Some fantastic combination of piezoelectric and photo effects in the presence of the intense radiation of Donophan, would perhaps account for the pseudo-life in the crystals.

Gradually, the thundering music of the crystals was dimming as they proceeded. The walls on either side were changing character, sloping away at gentler angles, becoming more massive in bulk.

"There is a different frequency of vibration in these masses," suggested Millar Croatan. "We may be safer up here because they may not be able to rupture these."

"Possibly. And we might be able to scale these. If just one of us could get up there, he could perhaps see the ship and make contact. Keep a lookout for the best spot to try it, and we'll—"

Dawson's words were cut through by a sudden scream that burst through the open communicator circuit in the helmets of all of them.

"Help!" It's burning! Oh, let me go—" It was the wild, stricken cry of Roal Canby.

HILL POINTED ahead. The defile had become straight now. In the distance, they could see a figure. "They've got him!" cried Hill.

"Come on, Hill—the rest of you stay here," Dawson ordered.

They broke into a clumsy run, hampered by the bulk of the suits, but they left the others rapidly behind. As they neared the form of Canby, they saw that he was pinned upon a giant crystal surface that formed a glittering table—or altar. Two other perfectly faceted stones had been rolled together above him, making it impossible for him to wrig-

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gle free.

Through the depths of these stones, the captured sunlight streamed down, focussing directly upon him in burning fury.

The crystals formed enormous lenses, the men saw, pouring the energy of the sun in murderous intensity upon the now unmoving form. They had heard no cry since that first outburst.

"They're burning him inside his suit!" gasped Hill.

They rolled the giant crystals away and stared down into the face piece of the helmet. What had once been the head of the bitter, eccentric artist was now a black, shrunken thing that made the spacemen sick inside themselves. Canby had literally been cooked by the intense rays.

"That husk is of no consequence," a voice spoke suddenly.

They looked up. At a little distance, and part way up the cliffside, stood one of the crystomorphs.

"I am Roal Canby," it said. "The thing you see there is the fragile husk that I have shed forever. I have achieved the immortality of which I dreamed, at which you scoffed. The thing that was Roal Canby is embedded forever in the heart of this eternal crystal."

The others had come up now. They heard the words, and listened in astonished disbelief. Then, they turned to stare at the nauseating thing within the spacesuit.

"Do not mourn or pity the corpse that you see there," said the figure fiercely. "Mourn for yourselves. This is an opportunity of which I never dreamed. For twenty years, I have been the pet of you sophisticated socialites, you patrons of the arts—who never felt an honest, unadorned emotion except hate in your whole lives.

"For twenty years, I've fawned for your patronage, for subsistence to pursue my art. Now, in some measure I can repay you for those years of crawling to your teas and your parties, for being shown like an amusing freak."

His high string-like voice ended with an inhuman laugh, and the crystomorph that held the life of Roal Canby turned swiftly and darted up the crags of the mountainside.

THEY STOOD as if hypnotized until he was gone, then slowly turned towards each other.

"It's unbelievable," murmured George. "Canby—turning into that thing. What do you suppose he meant by that threat?"

"Joining forces with the others who are trying to vibrate the walls down on us, I suppose," said Dawson. He looked once more at the limp spacesuit that held only a charred corpse.

He rounded the crystal altar and disappeared for a moment, then returned. "This is as far as the canyon goes. Behind that crystal is complete dead end. We're going to have to attempt scaling the cliff from here."

Almost indistinguishable across the widened area of the dead-end defile, there was sudden movement. The Earthlings suddenly recognized the four crystomorphs who had led them here. They had been standing silently against the wall the whole time.

Roene and Anya screamed as they saw the creatures, and backed sharply away.

"Do the rest of you wish the Crystal of Life?" asked Kor Remy.

"No," said Dawson evenly. "We do not wish it. None of us. Do you understand that?"

"We understand what you say, but we do not understand why any man would reject immortal life. Yours is the choice. Your companion has joined our brothers to bring you death."

Dawson ignored the crystomorphs.

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He squinted into the transmitted light of the crystals, scanning the face of the barriers that rose on either side. He estimated the possibility of contacting the ship from any of those peaks. At last, he pointed to one.

"I think we'd be in line of sight from there. It looks as if it might be possible to scale up to it, by following the step-like crystals that break off along the front of it. We'll draw lots to see who goes."

"Let me go ahead," said Millar. "Neither of you can be spared, in case of accident. I'm as good as either of you in making the attempt."

"We'll draw lots," said Dawson.

Millar got it, anyway.

The sweet, deathly chords were renewing as he advanced to the opposite wall and cautiously stepped up to a ledge formed by a crystal surface.

THE MUSIC now was of deeper tone, as if to match the mass of the surrounding crags, but it began to penetrate their senses with the same eerie violence as before.

Millar's foot slipped.

"Use the pointed extensors on the suit fingers," called Dawson. "Extend them as far as they will go, and try to find holding crevices with them. But don't get them wedged so tightly you can't get them out! You would be stuck good, then."

The trembling beneath their feet was swelling to earthquaking proportions as they watched his painfully slow advance up the cliff face.

Mrs. Phillips and her daughters surveyed the imprisoning walls with gathering terror.

"We're trapped," Roene squealed. "We'll never get out of here alive!"

Dawson ignored their rising murmur of terror and complaint. He moved away and sat down on the crystal bier upon which the corpse of Roal Canby lay.

He was tired. Deadly tired. It was a fallacy to believe that a man could go forever and die with his boots on, he thought. There is a time when a man has to accept a change of function and a slowing of pace. It was as much a part of living as working and pursuing a career.

He had made a gross error in bringing the Phillips party into the canyon in the first place. An experienced deep space man would have conducted a survey first. If death came to them all, it would be the sole responsibility of Tom Dawson.

And death seemed not far away, he thought. He looked up to the thundering walls. Fragments of crystal were erupting spasmodically, stabbing downward in vicious thrusts. It would take time, but the masses that reared about them could shatter as easily as the more delicate structures that had closed them off.

It would take time. But not nearly so much time as would be required for the *Westphalia* crew to become alarmed and send out a search. They had been in the defile only an hour. Two more to go. By that time, the crags would be leveled by the insidious music of death which the enemy crystomorphs had set up.

Dawson had been watching each move of the steadily advancing Millar. He mentally commended the man's competent effort. Millar was a good man; it was easy to understand his fury at Anya's stupid, promiscuous betrayal.

DAWSON stiffened abruptly. He squinted his eyes in the glare. There was a movement of light just a short way below Millar. He was certain then of the thing he had dreaded. One of the crystomorphs was following Millar.

He looked at the group of them

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across the narrow area. All four of those aliens were still there. Then this one above must be one of the enemy.

"Millar—stop. Watch carefully. Behind you is a crystomorph. See if he'll speak. See if it's—Canby."

They saw Millar turn with a start. The crystomorph halted, too. They heard Millar's voice challenging the creature, then he spoke to his companions.

"It's not Canby—at least, that's what it says. I can't make sense out of the rest of it. He just says he's going along, that he belongs with me. Do you think I should try to shove him over?"

"No! That would be like scuffling with a mountain goat up there. Leave him alone if he keeps out of your way. We'll watch and warn you if he gets too close. Try to find out why he's going along, if you can."

The steady climb of Millar strengthened Mrs. Phillips despite the blasting sound of the trembling crystal mountains. It seemed as if each step that Millar took was one more in her own advance towards the security of the sophisticated civilization in which she reigned.

Her fury renewed itself against the circumstances that had brought this terror upon her. Circumstances personalized in the figure of Captain Dawson.

"I want you to know that your dismissal will be automatic upon our reaching the first civilized port, Captain," she said in sudden fury. "I hold you personally responsible for this predicament in which our very lives have been threatened."

He turned slowly to her. He had almost forgotten her venomous spirit was present in the concern with Millar's advance. "Have been threatened, Mrs. Phillips? We are not out yet."

He knew that some day he would be in a position to say more to her, and would say it, but now was not the time. He would be content merely if a medium-sized rock would hit her on the head with sufficient force to knock her out until they were either rescued or damned for certain.

He returned his attention to Millar. The sickening wash of evil sound seemed to swirl up and about the tapering peak to which the man was advancing. Not many feet now, and he should be in line of sight with the ship, but they were the most difficult.

A SHRIEK exploded in his ears. He whirled. One of the crystomorphs was advancing upon the bulbous suited figure of Sandra Phillips with a jagged chunk of crystal in its arms. Dawson leaped frantically from the altar and swept the missile from the grasp of the crystomorph with a single motion.

Then, he faced the thing, rage blazing in his eyes. The alien turned leisurely and regarded him with an air of profound stupidity.

"It was the thing you wanted done," said Kor Remy.

Dawson choked on the outburst that came to his throat. It was the thing he had wanted, he thought incredibly, a stupid rage he had permitted himself for a moment.

"No—it is not what I want. Are you one who would bring the mountains upon us, too?"

"Only as you wish it," said Kor Remy.

"What do you mean by that? None of us wish the mountains brought down upon us!"

"Oh, yes, you do! She does—and they do." He pointed in swift succession to Sandra Phillips, her two daughters and Roene's husband. "They want the mountains to fall upon you—and he who has been

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changed. We do not understand. It has never happened before."

"What does that crazy thing mean?" demanded Mrs. Phillips.

Dawson backed and sat again upon the crystal altar. He felt as if he had been struck a heavy blow in the chest. With a flash of insight as blinding as the river of light that flowed through the walls, he understood!

He turned to the crystomorph. "Which one is me?" he said abruptly.

"I am," replied Kor Remy.

"The rest of you—go to your image."

Immediately, the remaining three aliens stepped beside an Earthling. They lined up by George, Irene, and Ralph Hill.

"There is your answer," breathed Dawson slowly. "You said somebody might kill somebody before the trip was over, George. You didn't know how right you were!"

"What are you talking about?" screamed Mrs. Phillips. "You sound as crazy as these things."

"They aren't alive at all," said Dawson. "That's why we've seen no evidence of habitation or artifacts. These things were dead crystal like all the rest of this world—until we came.

"Dead, but not wholly quiescent, perhaps. Piezo forces and photo processes under the intense radiation of the white dwarf sun produce a low form of mobility, but nothing resembling true life.

"They can only copy, reflect, if you will. They are nothing but mirrors—mirrors of life, to put it crudely, because I can think of no other term.

"But they are primitive in capabilities. They can reflect nothing but the most gross and elemental facets of the individual to whom they attach themselves. The delicate inhibitions which have come so late in man's evolution cannot be reflected at all.

"And so we have it. For each of us, there is a crystal mirror intent upon obeying the most elemental impulses and primitive purposes within us. Four of the crystals are here with us who want to survive and get out."

"Why aren't the others here?" exclaimed George. "I don't understand. And why aren't those four trying to help us?"

"That requires more initiative and purpose than they can muster, but they can be ordered!"

He turned furiously to the four crystomorphs. "Get up on the mountains. Destroy your brothers who seek to shatter the mountains. Help the one who is climbing."

They hesitated as if uncomprehending.

"Go!" Dawson commanded.

THEY SPRANG away, up the crystal cliffs, so swiftly they seemed to have disappeared. The Earthlings waited long moments, and then there came a sudden change in the terrible music of the crystals. It became ghastly with dissonance and clash of sound.

But Dawson gave a sigh of relief. The vibration threatening the hills was broken.

"It's awful!" cried Mrs. Phillips. "How can we stand it?"

"Turn off your communicator, if you like."

She ignored the suggestion. "You didn't answer George's question. Why aren't the others here? Why isn't there one for me and for Anya, and—"

"There is. Don't you understand, Mrs. Phillips? They are up on the hillside trying to kill us all by shattering the crystal mountains. They are carrying out the basic commands of your stinking little mind as they read it."

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"George!" she screamed. "I won't be insulted this way. This monster—"

"Your basic feeling is hate—all of you who are not represented. Each of you hates one of the others so intensely that he wants to kill. The object of your affection, Mrs. Phillips, is George, of course. You want to squander his money in even greater quantities.

"Anya wants to get rid of Millar so she—"

"That's a lie! I'll kill you!"

"Perhaps you will." Dawson listened intently. The harmony seemed to be returning, as if the enemy crystomorphs were overpowering the others.

"I can't see that you should be so bitter since Canby's already dead," Dawson continued. "Roene and Omar have a mutual desire to slit each other's throat—"

The four of them seemed to move towards him with common fury and prearranged unison.

"I'll kill you," snarled Omar.

"Look up there! Look at yourselves. You are the only murderers who ever had a chance to preview their own crimes. Watch yourselves kill!"

They were taken back by Dawson's bitter intensity. Involuntarily, their eyes turned upward to the peaks. They could see now the conflicting figures of the crystomorphs. Four pairs of them stood on narrow ledges slugging with brutal, insane fury. The Earthlings forgot, momentarily, their own expressions of rage as they watched the alien battle.

Suddenly, one of the figures tottered, grasped helplessly at a ledge, and fell. It crashed thunderously, almost at their feet.

Then, from the ledge, the victor gave a savage, insane cry: "You would battle the immortals, you weaklings of Earth!"

"That's Canby," cried George.

"No," said Dawson. "Canby's dead. That thing is no more Canby than any of the rest of them are actually us. Through the crystal, and by his death, the matrix of Canby's impulses was more permanently fixed into the crystomorph. Whether it will exist forever, I do not know."

AT THEIR feet, the broken remnants of the fallen crystomorph were slowly drawing together, congealing like droplets of water upon an oiled surface. Some feeble essence of life seemed to be returning.

"Get back up there," Dawson commanded the thing.

The form rose, as if from some horrible resurrection, and turned once more to the cliffside.

Then, the figure which had followed Millar broke away from its opponent and intercepted the more powerful crystomorph of Canby. It was as if Millar had ordered it to do so, exposing himself to the attack of the remaining enemy, who was only fifty feet away from him.

Millar had hated Canby with a mortal hatred, Dawson thought. That was why Millar's crystomorph had been among the enemy. Upon Canby's death, the hatred vanished, and the crystomorph sought Millar's side.

Now, the whole outcome of the battle seemed to depend on whether Millar could reach the peak before that one unopposed crystomorph seized him.

The peak was twenty feet away along a treacherous narrow incline. The silent, shining form of the crystomorph gained steadily behind Millar. The resurrected ally was much too far away to help.

Dawson looked at the other struggling pairs. Hate was stronger than survival, he thought bitterly. The crystomorph allies were steadily los-

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ing.

There was nothing that any of them could do. The swelling river of sound seemed to sweeten with deadly melodiousness as their crystomorphs weakened. The valley floor trembled anew with the consonance of destruction.

DAWSON looked intently at the faces of his companions. He wondered if there were just one slim chance....

"I wonder who that is following Millar," he said slowly. "If he doesn't make it, we haven't got a chance.

"Look how that thing creeps up. He's gaining on Millar. He wants to kill him so that someone here below will die also.

"It could be any of you up there. None of you knows for sure. You all hate bitterly enough to kill, and you are watching your own actions.

"It doesn't matter that Millar is not the immediate object of your hate. It doesn't matter that you will kill the rest of us and yourselves in the process. That's the way hate is —striking out blindly, spreading destruction at random to accomplish murder.

"Is it you, Sandra Phillips?" he whispered fiercely. "Is it you crawling along that ledge to push Millar to his death just so that George can die? George is here beside you watching as you close for the strike that will mean his own death. That's a cruel and bitter thing for a man who has been by your side all your life. Are you sure you hate him that much, Sandra Phillips?

"There must have been a time long ago," he went on more softly, "a time when you were very young, when you loved George Phillips. There was a time when he had nothing, only a dream of building great things, and you shared that dream with him. You loved him, and promised to help him build that dream. Think back, Sandra Phillips. Was there not such a time?"

"Stop it!" she screamed.

And then, in the phones of his communicator, he heard the ugly sound of her aged voice sobbing. He heard her cry out helplessly, "George, George..."

Dawson glanced up towards the distant peak. His face was sweating. He could feel it running down his neck in hot, steamy trickles. He could not see what the enemy was doing to Millar. But he couldn't quit now....

"It might be you, Anya," he said. "Roal Canby's dead, and are you sure you want the memory of that little artist with the twisted mind instead of Millar who loves you? You aren't so cold and bitter that you can't remember what his embrace is like."

"I'll kill you—"

"Because I give you back to him? And him to you? Is that so despicable a gift, Anya? Think...

"Or is it Roene or Omar? Perhaps you have never known what it is to love, you have been so intent on conquest and escape. Perhaps you could find out—with each other—"

Suddenly, a cry rang in the phones of his helmet, and he could see a figure standing alone and waving frantically.

Millar's voice was slightly hysterical. "I can see them! I can see the ship. I'm getting through to them!"

HOURS LATER, the luxury yacht lifted from the surface of the crystal world. Captain Dawson turned at the sound of a step behind him on the bridge. It was George Phillips.

There was life in his eyes, and laughter, where there had been only resignation for so many long years.

"You're not really serious about going to that chicken farm, are you,

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Tom?"

"I was never more serious about anything in my life. I've come to the conclusion that when we old space dogs retire, we should really retire and not mess around about it. The last five minutes in Crystal Valley added ten years to my age."

"I hope it's not permanent," said Phillips soberly. "It took ten off mine. You can never know what you've done for us. The Women are ready to start all over again. And it means one hell of a lot to me to be able to feel like I could push off any time now and know that my family was not an utter failure."

There was the suspicion of tears in the eyes of the old man, and his voice was uncomfortably tremulous. "The rest of them will be around to tell you so themselves when they feel up to facing you again."

"I hope they don't do that," said Dawson. "I was only trying to save our necks, and the one way to do it was to keep that crystomorph from pushing Millar off the cliff."

"You gave us all a new lease on life in the process, and we won't forget it. But tell me, just whose was that crystomorph that was after Millar?"

Dawson shook his head. "I don't really know. And does it matter?"

"No—no, it doesn't. Actually, it's much better this way, knowing that it could have been any of them. Because of that fact, none of them will ever forget it. They'll never forget what it looked like seeing a reflection of themselves trying to commit murder."

He looked back at the planet that now was a mere disc of unbearable brightness in the sky.

"'...some giftie gie us,'" he murmured softly, "'to see ourselves as others see us!'"

THE END

THAT MACHINE SHOP BITE!

• • •

By June Lurie

THE NOVEL spectacle of a Russian holding up to view a handmade pair of stainless steel "choppers" has lost its shock value. Practically every known substance has been tried in making false teeth with varying degrees of success. But a new development is leading to something which might go like this twenty years from now:

"Hurry up, dear. We'll be late for the rocket if you take much longer."

"I'm sorry, but I've got to rush over to the dentist's."

"Why, Jim?"

"He's going to screw in a new set of false teeth!"

That conversation isn't as ridiculous as it sounds. In fact, it is likely to be cold fact by then, for certain experiments have been made, whose results can definitely be called successful. Some ten or twelve years ago the experiments began. They first involved the attachment of several artificial teeth to a living dog's jaw-bone, by directly fastening them with screws of a cobalt-chromium alloy! When the dog was fitted with these artificial teeth, no loosening was detected, no inflammation and no irritation. To all intents and purposes, the teeth attached to the dog's jawbone were as good as his own!

Immediately, the same experiment was tried on human beings with this new alloy (it had been attempted for centuries with other materials, but invariably the screws would not remain in the jawbone) and this too proved successful to a limited degree. Eventually the screw-attached teeth in the human mouth loosened. It was found that a scale built up around the screw thread permitted the screw to rotate and work itself loose gradually.

Present investigations are aimed at devising a solution or a coating for the teeth with screw-bases, which will permit the metal to adhere firmly to the jawbone. Fantastic as it may seem, the time is likely to come when an oral surgeon will be able to completely fit out a mouth with a set of artificial teeth screwed directly with cobalt-chromium to the jawbone—and these teeth will remain in position indefinitely.

Teeth are Man's weakest auxiliary parts. The effort and energy he spends on them is astronomical, only to undermine that effort with his regular civilized eating habits. Between artificial teeth and spectacles, along with artificial hair and electronic hearing aids, it appears as if Man will eventually change himself unknowingly into the mechanical robot of fiction!

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HYDROGEN IS ALL!

By Cal Webb

EARLY proponents of the atomic theory of matter had among their advocates one, who made an unusually accurate guess, one who anticipated a belief that is gradually taking hold of most modern physicists. It is the idea that out of the basic element hydrogen, everything else has come! A study of the distribution of the elements not only on our Earth but in the interior of stars and drifting through the dusty wastes of interstellar space, shows that hydrogen is enormously abundant, amounting to a million times or more the quantity of all the other elements combined!

This does not seem to be a chance effect. In fact there is a definite relationship. The hydrogen-helium energy cycle which feeds the voracious furnace that is the sun gives evidence of this. Here complex elements are compounded from that simply primordial matter, an electron and a proton—called hydrogen.

While the atomic furnaces on Earth haven't synthesized the heavy elements from hydrogen, it must be remembered that we are at the beginning. Perhaps after work on the hydrogen bomb, methods may be discovered for this new type of creation.

In direct opposition to this belief is the thought that the fundamental stuff of the universe may have come from some very complex material involved in a thermonuclear reaction at the beginning of time! This theory regards the present elements as the broken down constituents of this master element, much as uranium breaks down into simpler elements in the conventional atomic bomb!

Right now the answer mainly lies in astronomy. The instruments of this "abstruse" subject may provide—in fact will provide—the answer to the most basic of all problems concerning the origin of the universe.

METEORIC WINDSOCK

By Roy Zuber

INFORMATION about the upper atmosphere is exceedingly valuable in this day of guided missiles, high altitude planes, and the science of weather forecasting. The standard method of obtaining such information has been the use of "radiosondes", small balloons carrying equipment which broadcasts back to receivers on Earth, the conditions obtaining at altitudes of twenty to forty miles. Unfortunately an appreciable atmosphere exists at altitudes twice or more as great as this, altitudes which the balloons can't reach. Rockets can of course, but they're quite expensive and impracticable.

A new method of obtaining this desired information has been discovered. It depends on the rather simple fact that when meteors strike the Earth's atmosphere they disintegrate for the most part at altitudes of fifty to eighty miles and in the process of shattering, give off high frequency radio waves! And there is the answer. By tracking and following these pulses of radiation down on Earth with a suitable antenna-receiver system, an exact picture of the wind drifts at such heights can be found. The winds range in speed from thirty to a hundred and thirty miles an hour and greatly influence the air masses beneath them.

The bursting meteorite gives a "puff" of radiation which lasts only a few seconds, but thousands of meteorites are arriving per hour hence adequate information can be obtained easily. Since the only equipment necessary is a simple receiver-antenna system, the process is cheap. The information is invaluable in all sorts of meteorological work. With radio waves coming from the sun, and now from meteorites, and also from the stars, it would appear as if the Universe was one huge broadcasting system!

FEAR IS A FLAME

By W. R. Chase

MIRACLE drugs seem to be announced at the rate of two a month, and consequently there is a tendency to be contemptuous of them. Actually, the so-called wonder drugs have really given the medical profession the most powerful tool they have had since the discovery of bacterial infection.

In particular, the famous ACTH has proved its value over and over again, and will probably be one of the future's major weapons against injury and disease. Modern man is subject to so many ills, in industry especially, from the dreadful effects of chemicals and burns, and it is in these fields that ACTH has proved so powerful.

There are a number of cases on record where individuals have had three-quarters of their bodies subjected to flesh and tissue destroying flames from gasoline and oils, and yet, in defiance of all the laws of medical science, lived and recovered completely with little or no scar tissue! Treatment with ACTH was responsible, of course. So successful have drugs like this proved, that there are a dozen laboratories devoted solely to the preparation of experiments designed to discover new "wonder-drugs"!

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FIX ME SOMETHING TO EAT

By William P. McGivern

How good would your appetite be if you were invited to dinner and found the main course would be yourself?

"WE HAVEN'T got a chance, Barny."

"Shut up! Keep your eye on that cop at the corner."

The two speakers were crouched beside a third-floor window over-looking the street. It was nighttime and their shadows loomed intermittently against a wall of the room, appearing and disappearing in unison with the neon sign that flashed from the top of a building across the street.

One of the men was huge and powerful with great broad shoulders and a full strong face. His name was Barny Myers. His eyes, small, cold, expressionless, were a better clue to his character than his open features.

The other man was smaller, plumply built, with soft, almost feminine features and curly blond hair. His pouting lips gave him the look of a sadistic cherub. His name was Filbert Smith and he was nick-named Filly.

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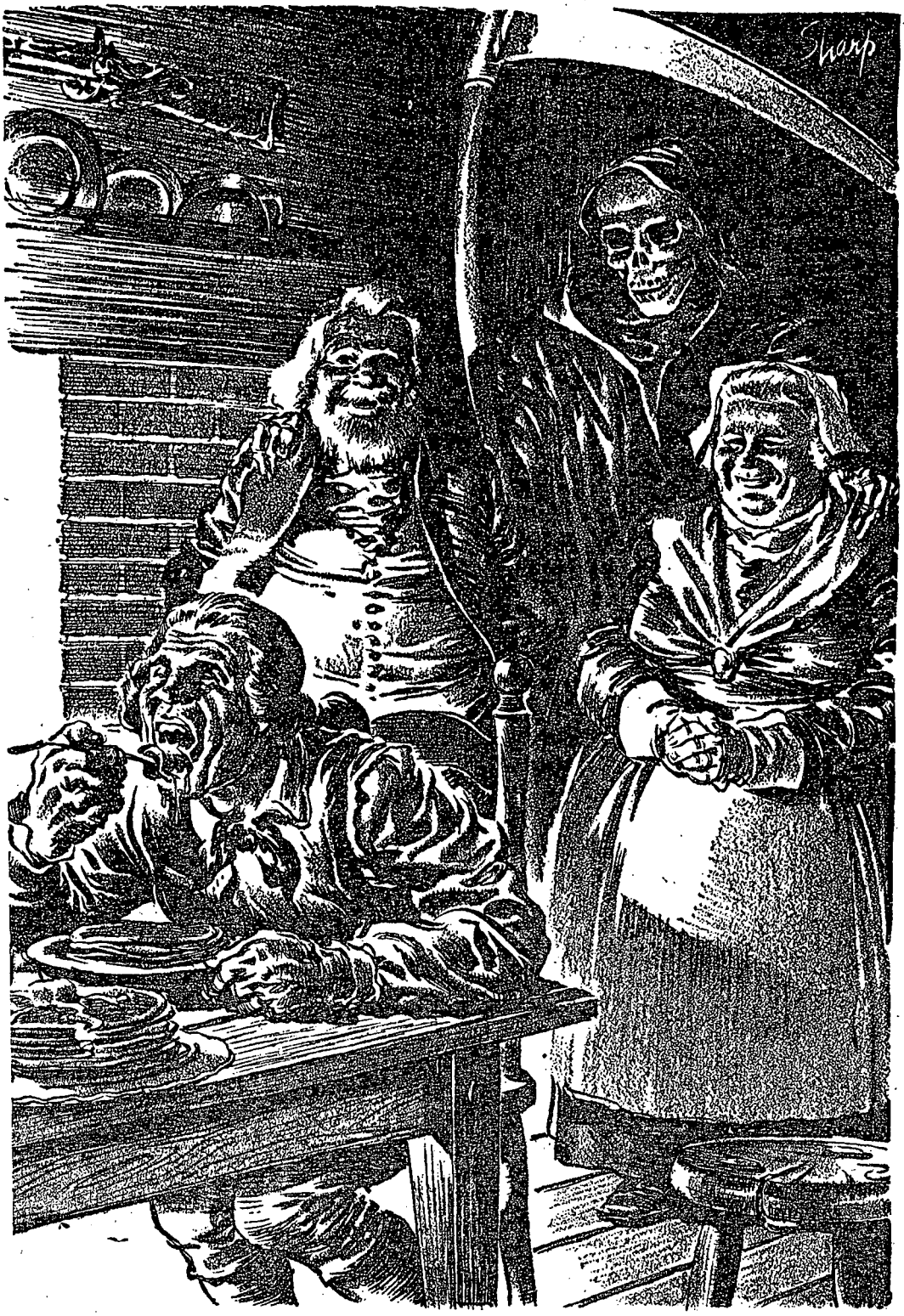

"Take it easy," Barny said, his mouth full. "This is no time to get indigestion!"

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Now he cast a beseeching glance at Barny's grim profile, and said: "They've got us surrounded. The street is too quiet."

"Maybe they have, and maybe they haven't," Barny said. The neon light flashed across his face, brought out the gleam in his eyes and glinted on the gun in his big hand. "They don't know what building we're in, though. If they did we'd have heard from them before this."

"They been clearing people out of the block all day," Filly said. "They're ready to come after us."

"We'll be here when they do," Barny said. "It wouldn't be polite not to welcome the lousy rats. Keep your eye on that cop. He'll probably give the signal."

At the corner of the block a man stood reading the paper. He wore a trench coat with the collar turned up against the misting rain that was falling.

Filly watched this man and the breath was ragged in his throat.

Barny Myers and Filbert Smith had robbed a bank in the center of town the day before and the proceeds of the job—sixty-eight thousand dollars—was securely stacked away in a small black bag in the closet of the room. They had planned to get clear out of the state by this time, but a series of incredibly bad breaks had completely shattered their schedule. First, a nervous guard at the bank had gone for his gun. They had shot him dead, but in the excitement a teller pressed a general alarm that had brought dozens of police cars to the scene. Driving off in the getaway car they had crashed into a milk wagon at the first intersection. They had abandoned the car and stolen another, but within half a mile the engine had sputtered and died. They saw then that the gas gauge read: Empty!

They had set off on foot, dodged through alleys and streets and finally had come across this rooming house. The landlady, a drunken old drudge, had given them a room and they had settled down for a siege.

A GENTLE knock sounded on the door.

Barny wheeled, his lips forming a silent oath.

"It's them!" Filly squealed.

"Shut up!" Barny said. He walked to the door, moving slowly and stealthily, and his gun was ready. Gripping the knob, he turned it slowly, and then jerked open the door.

A small girl with enormous eyes and dark pigtails stood in the corridor. She let out a tiny scream and then clapped both hands over her mouth.

"What'd ya want?" Barny snapped.

The girl's eyes were fixed in awe on the gun. She took her hands away from her mouth and whispered, "Is that a real gun? The kind cowboys wear? I saw one in a circus once, only it had a shiny handle."

"What'd ya want?" Barny repeated.

"My mother sent me to get you," the little girl said. "She's sick and she sent me to get somebody to help her. She has to go to the hospital," she added, and her voice was solemn with the importance of her mother's illness.

"Where is your mother?"

"Just down the hall. Will you come and help her?"

There was a speculative light in Barny's tiny eyes. "Yeah, I'll come with you, kid."

"For God's sake!" Filly cried hoarsely.

"Shut up!" Barny said. "Maybe we'll take the kid's mother to a hospital."

"Are you crazy?"

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"Think it over, stupe, and you'll get the idea. Come on, kid, take me to your mother."

"Oh, thank you."

Barny followed the little girl down the corridor and turned into a room whose door was standing open. He saw a tired-looking young woman of perhaps twenty-eight or thirty lying in a narrow bed with the covers pulled up to her throat.

"It was good of you to come," she said, smiling weakly at Barny.

"He's going to help you, Mommy," the little girl said.

"What's your trouble?" Barny said.

"I think it might be pneumonia," the woman answered. "I worked late the other night, you see, and got soaked coming home. The next morning after I'd taken Judy to school, I began to feel that I was coming down with something."

"Well, I think the best thing to do is take you to a hospital," Barny said.

"I—I don't have any money. It will have to be the County Hospital."

"Don't you worry about that. Just get into some kind of a wrapper and we'll get started."

Barny went back to his own room while the woman was dressing. Filly looked at him and shook his head. "I don't get it."

Barny peered out the window at the cop at the corner. "Still waiting for us, eh?" he said, his voice grim. "Well, they won't have to wait much longer. We're leaving, Filly. We're walking out of here with that brat and her mother as shields."

Filly nodded and smiled slowly. His little mouth looked like a rosy O. "I understand now," he said. "For a minute I thought you might be trying to relive your days in the Boy Scouts."

"They wouldn't let me in the Scouts when I was a kid," Barny said, grinning. "I had a bad reputation on account of blowing the safe at the corner drug store when I was ten years old. Come on. Get the money and let's go."

HE WALKED back to the sick woman's room and helped her to her feet. She was wearing a blue robe and slippers and her face was drawn and pale. "I'm not sure I can make it," she said. "My knees are like water."

"You can make it all right," Barny said. "Try real hard."

They went into the corridor and started down the rickety steps. Barny had his left arm about the woman's waist and his right hand was in his suit-coat pocket holding his gun. Filly came after them holding the little girl's hand.

When they reached the first-floor hallway Barny jerked his head at Filly. "Check the back entrance."

Filly hurried off and Barny was alone with the woman and her daughter. There was one light in the hallway, a glaring unshaded bulb hanging from the ceiling, and in its pitiless illumination the rugs and furniture and wall paper seemed a bit cheaper than they actually were.

"I don't understand this," the woman said. She was leaning heavily on Barny's arm. "Why are we waiting here?"

"We're going out the back way," Barny said. "Now shut up. I got things on my mind."

"But—"

"I said, shut up."

The little girl began to cry. "Don't you say that to my Mommy."

Filly came back and Barny nodded at the little girl. "Shut her up," he said. "How's the back?"

"Okay, It leads to an alley which leads to a street. We can get a car there maybe." Filly scooped the little

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girl up as he was talking and clapped a hand firmly over her mouth. "Follow me," he said. "We won't run into trouble until we hit that street. They'll be waiting there, I guess."

Barny dragged the woman roughly down the corridor and through a kitchen to the backyard. The small party proceeded into the alley and turned to the right. Ahead was a street, and by the light of a lamp at the intersection, Barny saw a parked car with a man sitting behind the wheel. It wasn't a police car, so Barny began to grin. This might solve everything.

Actually it couldn't have been simpler....

There were cops waiting, all right, and they flashed lights on them but held their fire when they saw the hostages. Barny chased the man from the car, which was a big powerful Cadillac, and pushed the woman into the front seat, while Filly was leaping into the back with the child.

Barny gave the car the gun and raced right through the police cordon, and not a shot was fired; but three squad cars set off after them with sirens screaming.

That was when they got their first break in the whole miserable undertaking. Leaving the south end of town barely two blocks ahead of the racing police cars they managed to squeeze through a rail-crossing inches ahead of a lumbering freight train. The police cars were blocked and Barny and Filly had the open highway to themselves.

"What about the woman and the kid?" Filly said.

"Toss 'em out. I'll slow down."

"No—no," the woman said, and her voice was barely a whimper.

Barny slowed down to about forty. "Okay, hurry up," he snapped.

Filly opened the door and shoved the wailing child onto the running board. She clung to his arms, sobbing, and he had to strike her across the face to make her let go. The woman was too weak to struggle; but she stared at Barny with eyes that were suddenly murderous with hate.

"God will punish you," she gasped. "He will pay you back for this—this devilishness."

Barny shoved her out of the car with one powerful thrust of his arm and stepped on the accelerator. Filly peered out of the rear window. The child was lying perfectly still in the middle of the road, in a small crumpled heap, and the mother, he saw with astonishment, was trying to crawl toward her daughter. The woman's back or leg was broken because her progress was flopping and uneven, but the fact that she could make the effort at all struck Filly as remarkable.

"This mother love is quite a thing," he said to Barny. And then he grinned because he didn't like or trust any women....

THEY COVERED fifty miles in the next forty-five minutes, and Barny began to scowl.

"We got to get off this road. They've wired ahead probably by now."

"I'll watch for a place to turn off," Filly said.

Ten minutes later he spotted a gravelled side road. He shouted and Barny slapped on the brakes, then backed up and turned off onto the side road.

They went on for the next hour or so, following the narrow winding road through country that became increasingly wild and virgin. Tall trees grew up straight from the sides of the road, and between the great trunks there was an almost impenetrable screen of underbrush.

"This is perfect," Barny said, grinning. "I knew there were woods out

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this way from town but I thought they'd be full of houses and people. But you could lose a whole damn regiment in here without missing 'em."

Finally the road ended in a small clearing. They climbed out of the car and peered around, somewhat abashed by the deep unmoving silence. The moonlight that filtered through the trees was weak and pale.

"Well, what now?" Filly said, and unconsciously lowered his voice.

"We'll push on into the woods," Barny said. "First, we'll hide the car, though. We can go through these woods and come out on the other side by tomorrow morning. Then we grab another car and keep going."

They drove the car as deep into the bushes as they could and covered it with tree branches. When that was done Filly picked up the satchel of money and followed Barny into the woods....

Six hours later they stopped for about the fifth time to smoke a cigarette and get their breath. They sat on the end of an upturned log and listened to the creepy silence.

"Damn place gets on my nerves," Filly said.

"As long as you don't hear nothing you're okay," Barny said. "Just remember that."

"What do you mean?"

"Dogs. Did you ever have dogs after you?"

"No," Filly said.

"It ain't any fun."

"Well, who'd set dogs after us?" Filly said uneasily.

"The police might. They find that we took to the woods and they'll break out dogs, all right. Let's get moving."

"Sure, what are we waiting for?" Filly said, with a glance over his shoulder.

They kept on the rest of the night and by dawn both men were tired and hungry. It was cold in the woods, a dank clammy wind mourned about them constantly, and they had been unable to find water.

"So we'd be in the clear by morning, eh?" Filly said, sarcastically.

"Shut up!" Barny said. "I didn't know these damn woods were so deep."

"Well, I'm not moving another step until I get good and rested," Filly said, flopping down on the cold hard ground. He closed his eyes and breathed slowly and gratefully.

A sound that was somewhat like the thin wailing of a flute drifted in with the wind.

Barny turned his head sharply, trying to guess its direction.

"What's that?" Filly said.

"Dogs, bloodhounds. You can stay and get a good rest if you want," he said with harsh cruelty and strode off into the trees.

"Barney, wait for me," Filly cried, scrambling to his feet....

THE NOISE of the dogs grew in volume with every mile they covered. They were running now, stumbling occasionally in the heavy brush, but recovering as quickly as they could and staggering on to keep ahead of the devil-sound that whined in the wind.

Finally, Barny stopped and listened a moment. They could still hear the dogs, but the sound was fainter now.

"They lose the trail?" Filly said, and the words came out like sobs.

"No, they've stopped. It ain't right. I know dogs and they don't stop like that."

"What'll we do?"

"Keep going."

They plunged on into the brush, too tired to notice the branches that lashed their faces, even too tired to feel the terrible pangs of hunger and

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thirst. Then they heard a new sound before them, a chopping noise, the unmistakable sound of an axe biting into wood.

Barny took the gun from his pocket and moved ahead cautiously toward that familiar sound. He pulled a heavy bush aside and peered into a clearing.

There an old man was chopping wood. He was a fat little man with silvery hair and a tiny gray beard. He wore a soft flannel shirt and baggy trousers and he was humming a tune under his breath as he swung the axe with inefficient gusto at the log between his feet.

Barny dropped the gun slowly back into his pocket and winked at Filly. Then he pushed the brush aside and stepped into the clearing.

"Howdy, Pop," he said.

The old man looked up with a surprised smile on his face. He studied Filly and Barny for a second or two, and it was obvious that his old brain was struggling to assess the situation. Then he said: "'Allo, my friends."

"Our car broke down and we're looking for some place to get some food and a bed," Barny said. "Can you help us out?"

"Oh, yes, yes," the old man said eagerly. There was something foreign about his accent. It sounded faintly French, Filly decided. "You come with me. You are tired, *non*? And hungry, eh? We will fix all of that."

"Who's 'we'?" Barny said, and his hand moved unconsciously to his pocket.

"My wife Marie." He laughed and the wrinkles about his eyes puckered in dozens of wreaths and criss-crosses. "She is good cook, you'll see. You come, eh?"

"Sure," Barny said. He laughed shortly. "We'll come."

The old man led them about a half mile along a faintly marked trail and when they turned sharply for about the twentieth time they saw a weather-beaten frame house set in the middle of a clearing. There was a barn and several out-buildings clustered about it, and chickens and dogs were running about in the hard-packed dirt yard.

"You don't have many people come this way, I'll bet," Barny said.

"No, nobody comes here anymore," the old man said. "Long time ago, when we first arrive, many people used to come by. But times change, people grow old..." He sighed and left the sentence unfinished.

THE OLD MAN'S feminine counterpart appeared on the porch and shouted a cheery hallo at them. She was short and dumpy with plump rosy cheeks and white hair tied in a bun at the base of her neck. An enormous apron covered her ample waist and fell clear to the tips of her brightly polished shoes.

"This is Mama," the old man said, smiling at her with pleasure. "Mama, these good men need food and a bed."

"Were they in an accident?" Mama said. "There is blood on their faces." Her eyes were very dark and solicitous and she ran the tip of a tiny tongue over her full lips in a gesture of anxiety.

"Now do not jabber like a bird," the old man said, but his voice was kind. "We will take care of them first, and let them tell us about themselves later."

"Yes, Papa," the little woman said, and hurried off.

Papa took them into the warm comfortably furnished parlor and with much bustling and muttering under his breath found glasses and poured them each a generous portion of brandy. After that he led them upstairs to a bedroom where Mama was filling basins with hot water. Soap and

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towels were ready for their use, and Papa brought them two old flannel shirts from his room.

"Maybe they are too leetle, eh? But they are clean, *non*?"

With that he left them alone.

Barny looked at Filly, a slow grin spreading across his face. "I think we hit a perfect spot," he said. "There's no radio or telephone here, and these old duffers will put us up forever. Perfect, eh?"

Filly grinned too and stripped off his shirt....

Downstairs, half an hour later, they found an amazing breakfast waiting for them. Chicken livers, broiled to tender succulence in a sauce of wine and oil, golden potatoes swimming in butter graced with chives and garlic, a platter of rosy-yoked eggs, rich yellow muffins—Barny and Filly hardly knew where to start. There were flagons of rich Burgundy to wash down the food and steaming hot coffee to chase the wine. Afterward Mama brought in a plum pudding steeped in brandy and a plate of sharp cheeses.

"Now you sleep good, eh?" Papa said, twinkling at them over his spectacles.

"Brother, what food!" Barny said, letting out his breath reverently. "How about you? Aren't you eating?"

"Oh, I've had my breakfast," Papa said.

"And Mama?"

"Yes, Mama too. We just enjoy watching you eat. Eh, Mama?"

Mama blushed and laughed, and Filly, who was oddly perceptive about relationships between men and women, guessed that Papa's remark was a private joke, and probably a slightly off-color one.

The two men ate and drank the rich heavy food and wine until their eyelids began to droop from exhaustion. Then Papa led them to their bedroom, turned down the covers and opened the window. "Now you get good sleep, eh?"

Barny and Filly stretched out on the bed and were both asleep before the old man tip-toed from the room....

WHEN THEY awoke it was dark and the wind that blew in the open window was cold and sharp. Filly got up and lighted a candle on the dresser and closed the window.

"It's damn odd, but I'm hungry," he said. "After that breakfast I didn't think I could eat for a week. But I feel like I'm starving. I hope supper's as good as that first meal was."

"Well, let's find out. I guess we wore ourselves out in that hike. I'm weak as a cat."

Mama and Papa were sitting in the parlor, but jumped up when the two men came in. "I was just to call you," Mama said gaily. "Dinner is all ready."

"Great!" Barny said.

"Perhaps a leetle drink first for the appetite?" Papa said, smiling like a man of the world.

Dinner was a replica of breakfast as far as bounty was concerned. There were two roasts, dripping with blood-red gravy, a variety of vegetables, each with its own rich sauces, and breads, cakes, puddings, and cheeses in profligate abundance.

Barny and Filly were half-way through their first heaping platefuls when they noticed that Mama and Papa were not eating.

"Hey, you don't know what you're missing," Barny said. He, himself, felt that he couldn't get enough of the rich spicy food. Every nerve and muscle in his body seemed to be crying for replenishment.

"Mama and I ate earlier," Papa said, and again, Filly noticed, Mama put her head back and laughed, while

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a warm rush of color stained her plump cheeks.

After dinner they sat in the parlor and sipped brandy. A fire glowed in the hearth and the only sound was the pleasant sighing of the wind against the window panes.

"It's nice and quiet here," Barny said. He looked from Mama to Papa. "You like that, eh?"

"Oh, yes, we like it nice and quiet," Papa said.

"Nobody ever comes by for any reason?" Filly asked.

"But hardly ever," Mama said.

Barny's eyes drooped sleepily. With an effort he forced them open. "We thought we heard some dogs when we were out in the woods," he said.

"Well, we have dogs," Papa said, smiling.

"No, these were off in the other direction."

"I did not hear them," Papa said. His smile became apologetic. "But my ears are getting old, eh? They do not hear everything so good anymore."

Suddenly, unmistakably, an automobile horn blasted the silence.

Barny came to his feet in a crouch. "Nobody comes by here, eh?" he said harshly to Papa.

"But who can it be?" Papa said.

"I got a hunch you know."

Mama got to her feet and stood wringing her hands. "Do not be upset. Papa will send whoever it is away. We have known persecution too. Think of us as your friends. You are in trouble, eh?"

"Yeah, and that means you're in trouble too," Barny said. "You and Kris Kringle here. If he doesn't get rid of whoever's heading this way you'll both learn what trouble is."

Papa got to his feet with perfect composure and slipped into a leather jacket. "You go into the kitchen," he said to Barny and Filly.

"Okay, but one funny move will be your last, remember that."

Barny stepped into the kitchen and walked to the window. Filly was at his side and both men had their guns in their hands.

THEY LOOKED out into the moon-lit yard and saw half a dozen men walking toward the house. The men carried rifles in the crooks of their arms and behind them, at least a hundred yards back, were the lights of a small truck.

"How'd they get that in here?" Filly said.

"Must be another route."

The men stopped about fifteen yards from the house. Barny heard the front door slam, then Papa's voice: "'Allo there, my friends. What you want?"

One of the men called out: "This is Sheriff Watson. You see a couple of men around here today, Mister Saint Gwynn." He pronounced the name: Sang Gwine.

"But *non*, my friends."

"You sure?"

"But of course." Papa laughed cheerfully. "You come in and look around, eh?"

Some of the men moved back toward the car, Barny noticed. Sheriff Watson said, "No, that won't be necessary," and Papa laughed again, good-naturedly.

The group drifted back to the car and Barny heard the motor start. The car moved away and soon its noise was swallowed up by the night.

Putting their guns away, Barny and Filly walked back into the living room. Papa was removing his jacket, a triumphant little grin on his face.

"You see, my friends," he said, studying them with his cheery twinkling eyes. "They believe me when I tell them I see no one."

Barney sat down in a comfortable

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chair and scowled at the fire. Several things were bothering him. "That's a queer sheriff," he said, at last. "He didn't even search the house. I wish all cops were that dumb."

"Or that scared," Filly said. Things were bothering Filly too. He had noticed the reluctance of the sheriff's men, and the nervous way they had peered about them while the sheriff was talking with Papa.

"What were they scared of?" Barny said to Filly.

Filly shrugged. "Maybe Papa knows."

Papa spread his hands in a gesture of bewilderment, but Mama suddenly put her knitting aside firmly. "You are right, they are afraid of us," she said. "Ever since we come from old country the people around here are afraid of us. They are—how-you-say—superstitious."

"Mama is telling the truth," Papa said sadly. "You know how it is? We have other customs, other ways of speaking, and our neighbors regard that as something *terrible*."

"It started in the war," Mama said excitedly. "When the fighting was going on near here and we went out to help the wounded." She wet her red lips nervously. "They would not even let us do that."

"Well, we are used to it now," Papa said. He patted his wife's hand gently. "Let us try to forget eh?"

Barny yawned. He couldn't keep his mind on the conversation. Every inch of him ached with weariness. "I'm going to get some sleep, if you folks will excuse me," he muttered.

"But of course. And sleep well. No one will disturb you," Papa said.

UPSTAIRS, Filly sat on the edge of the wide bed and stared at the floor with a petulant frown. "Barny," he said, at last, "this is the country they fought the Civil War in, that's right, isn't it?"

"That's right. Part of it, anyway," Barny said, stretching out on the bed without bothering to remove his clothes.

Filly turned to him anxiously. "Well, you heard what Mama said, didn't you? That they tried to help the wounded when the fighting was going on? She must have meant the Civil War."

"Ah, she's cracked," Barny mumbled sleepily. "Hell, she wasn't even born when the Civil War started. That was all of ninety years ago."

"What was she talking about then?"

"I tell you she's cracked," Barny said. "Shut up and lemme get some sleep."

"I don't like it here, Barny."

But Barny was fast asleep. Filly stared at him angrily for a few seconds; but then his own eyes began to droop and he was suddenly overcome with drowsiness. Resolving to discuss the matter in the morning he lay down beside Barny and almost instantly fell asleep....

The next morning both men were refreshed and cheerful. Barny ran his hands through his thick hair and then flexed his arms. "I feel like a new man," he announced happily. He scratched his three-day beard. "I'll grab a shave before breakfast. You need one too, Filly. We stumbled into luck when we hit this place, I tell you."

"I suppose so," Filly said. He remembered his anxiety of last night, but it seemed ludicrous in the clean bright sunlight that spilled into the room. From downstairs they could hear Mama bustling about in the kitchen and the aroma of broiling liver and bacon drifted up to them and set their mouths watering.

Papa came in a few seconds later carrying a tray on which there were

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two mugs of coffee and a plate of hot buttered biscuits. "Always before breakfast there is the little coffee and a bun," he said, beaming at them. "It is a custom in my country."

"Great," Barny said. "It's a wonderful custom."

"Where is your country, by the way?" Filly said.

"Austria," Papa said.

"Say, how about borrowing a razor," Barny said. "We'll look human after a shave."

"But of course."

Papa hurried out and returned a few minutes later with two clean straight razors, soap mugs and towels; but he had forgot a mirror. Barny asked him about it, but Papa said apologetically that there wasn't a mirror in the house. Then Filly remembered that he had a small one in his wallet. He dug his wallet out of his coat and went through it carefully but the mirror was gone.

He stood in the middle of the room with the wallet in his hand and suddenly he felt cold and afraid. Papa was smiling at him and Barny was testing the razor on his thumb. Filly didn't know why he was afraid; but from some depth in his subconscious he could feel a faint memory of horror roiling and twisting.

"It is lost?" Papa asked.

"Yes, I guess so," Filly said; he shivered.

"Well, I can get by without a mirror," Barny said. "I know where my face is, I guess."

"Good. I will wait for you downstairs," Papa said and left the room.

Filly shaved in silence. He cut himself once but it was only a nick.

When he was through he cleaned the razor carefully and then dried his face. Barny inspected him critically. "Just a couple of cuts which isn't too bad without a mirror," he said.

"A couple of cuts?"

"Yeah, one on your cheek, and one on your throat."

Filly's hand touched his neck, his fingers moved about gently. He felt a tiny opening just beside his adam's-apple. "I didn't cut myself there," he said slowly.

"Well, maybe it's a mosquito bite."

Filly looked at Barny sharply. He saw a tiny cut on Barny's throat. "You nicked yourself too," he said.

"I did not," Barny said. He felt the scratch and frowned. "Maybe a mosquito got me too," he said. "Come on, let's go down to breakfast. I'm starved again."

"So am I," Filly said. "I wish I wasn't."

"Don't be a fool. We're lucky to have good appetites considering the food Mama dishes out."

Filly hesitated a moment; and then he sighed and followed Barny downstairs....

THE DAYS sped by quickly. Barny and Filly fell into an unvarying rountine of eating and drinking and sleeping. They were always tired, always hungry, always thirsty. It got to be too much trouble to stay up during the days, so they lay on their bed most of the time napping, and not even bothering to talk to each other.

One day Filly noticed that his clothes were hanging loosely on him. For all the rich food he was eating he was losing weight! He glanced at Barny, seeing him it seemed for the first time in weeks, and he was amazed to note that the once-huge man was a hulk of his former self.

Barny's shirt hung like a tent over his bony shoulders and his cheeks were sunken and drawn.

"Barny, something's wrong with us," Filly said in a weak voice. "We're fading away, dying."

But Barny only grunted and slumped onto the bed. "I'm hungry,"

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he muttered. "Hungry."

"But we just ate."

"I'm always hungry."

Filly stared at Barny's recumbent form for a moment or two; and then he made a decision. Turning away, he walked downstairs. Mama and Papa were sitting in the living room. Mama was knitting, and Papa was staring into the fire with a faint smile on his face. He looked up at Filly. "Ah, hello there, my friend," he said.

"I'm going for a walk," Filly said. He watched them, swaying slightly on his feet, convinced that they would prevent him from leaving in some manner. But Papa nodded approvingly. "That is good idea," he said. "Walking makes the appetite, eh?"

Filly made a strangling sound in his throat and hurried out the door. When he was across the clearing and into the sheltering woods he began to run with frantic, hysterical speed. The trailing vines snapped at his face and his body, and occasionally he tripped over a root and fell headlong. But he fought on as if all the devils in hell were at his heels.

How long he ran he had no way of knowing. But at last he was forced to stop. Sobbing for breath he sat on a log and tried to muster the strength to keep going. But he was empty, drained. His strength was gone. He slipped from the log and lay flat on his back staring at the blue sky.

Night settled slowly over the forest. Filly fell asleep several times. Each time he woke he felt the coldness in his body and he knew that if he didn't rouse himself he would die.

Summoning his last bit of energy he forced himself to his feet. Tottering weakly he tried to plot a course; but he knew nothing about the stars or the woods. He began to cry. The tears ran down his thin cheeks and were frozen by the whipping wind. A bird screamed above him and Filly started in terror.

"I must go back," he whispered to the darkness. Barny was there; he could protect him. Hunger was growing in him like an aching physical thing. Turning he trudged weakly back toward Mama and Papa's farmhouse.

The cheery lights of the front room showed up through the trees in a manner of minutes; and he realized with despair that he had only gone about a hundred yards in a wild dash to freedom.

MAMA AND Papa met him at the front door with bustling solicitude.

"We thought you were lost," Papa said, helping him to a chair. "Some brandy, eh? You are cold, *non*?"

"I will fix your dinner," Mama said, and flitted off to the kitchen.

"No, no food," Filly gasped. "Where is Barny?"

"He is gone," Papa said.

"Gone?" The words were only a whisper. He stared up at Papa's round beaming face. "Gone where? Where did he go?"

Papa shrugged. "He said he must leave. That is all I know."

"No, no," Filly cried.

"You are tired," Papa said gently. "You must eat something and rest, eh?"

Mama came in with a tray of food. There was a whole chicken, steaming in a gravy of wine and blood, and a flagon of rich red wine.

"This will do you good, eh?" she said. She licked her lips and looked down on him with a smile. "You must get your strength back," she said.

"Get it back so you can take it away?"

The thought hammered in Filly's mind. He tried to lift himself from the chair but his arms had no strength. Papa cut a sliver of meat

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from the breast of the chicken and gently put it between Filly's lips. "You must eat," he said in a low crooning voice.

The taste of the food inflamed Filly. His hunger was suddenly wild and frantic. He tore at the chicken and wolfed down large pieces of the succulent meat. Papa poured wine for him which he gulped with desperate haste. Finally, sated and groggy, he slumped back in the chair, feeling his strength returning slowly.

Mama and Papa watched him approvingly.

"Now you must sleep," Mama said in a firm maternal voice.

"Yes, I must sleep," Filly said; but his brain was plotting warily.

He got to his feet and went up the stairs to his bedroom. Inside he closed the door and hurried to the closet where he kept his gun. It was still there, hanging on a peg. He jerked it from the holster and stuck it in the waistband of his trousers. And then, as he was starting to close the door, he saw the black bag in which they had kept their money.

He sank to his knees and opened it with trembling fingers. The money was still there, in sheafs of neat banknotes.

Filly knew then that Barny hadn't gone away. He wouldn't have left without the money.

FILLY GOT slowly to his feet and backed away from the bag of money as if it were an object of horror. He thought someone was in the room with him, heard someone hammering a blunt object against the walls; but then he knew that it was only his own heartbeat he was hearing.

He turned the knob of the door slowly and stepped out into the dark corridor. From below a wavering flash of firelight touched the stairs; and he could hear Mama and Papa talking.

"You are always so greedy, Mama." Papa's voice was fond, almost endearing.

"Oh, let's hurry," Mama said. Her voice was excited as a schoolgirl's. "He must be asleep by now."

"Now, now, we must be patient. You shouldn't have gone to the other one this afternoon. He was too weak. Now he is gone forever. All because my little girl is too greedy."

"He was about all done anyway. Come, Papa, let us go up for the other one. It has been so long since we've had visitors."

"Very well," Papa said indulgently.

Filly backed into his room, closing the door with clammy twitching fingers.

"God, God," he moaned, but the words stuck in his throat and he nearly vomited.

He heard light footsteps on the stairs.

He hurled himself on the bed, pulled the gun from his waist.

The footsteps approached his room, and then the door swung inward with a gentle protesting creak.

He saw them framed in the flickering shadowy firelight, saw their silvery heads, their placid contented features, their dumpy peasant's bodies. And he knew *what* they were.

"Stop!" he cried hoarsely.

They paid no attention to his words. They came into the room and moved slowly toward the bed.

Filly fired six shots at them, as fast as finger could work trigger. The butt of the gun slammed into the heel of his palm, and the shots echoed bangingly in the tiny room. Cordite soured the air.

Filly blinked and then screamed.

Mama and Papa were still walking toward him, and they were smiling eagerly now. The moonlight touched

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their glistening red lips and sharp white teeth.

Filly tried again to scream but the muscles of his throat were paralyzed.

And then they were on him; and in the brief moments left to him he learned that the reality was incredibly more monstrous than he had feared it would be.

THE END

THE LAWS OF CHANCE

By William Karney

NO SINGLE phase of mathematics is more important today than probability nd its offspring statistics. It has proven the most fruitful tool in every field of science. It lies at the foundation of most atomic theory. And yet its origins are extremely humble—humble is not the word—its origins are downright nasty—acco. ing to some lights.

Probability stems from the researches several early mathematicians were asked to do by gamblers! They wanted to know what the chances were of winning at cards under certain circumstances, and what the odds were against tossing dice in a certain way. And with true scientific objectivity the mathematicians answered their requests—and then intrigued—as was Pascal, —worked out the basic theory of probability and probability law.

And for a hundred years it remained primarily in the province of gambling. Chance and probability certainly had nothing to do with science—they thought! But then science suddenly burgeioned into considering things like the atomic theory and the molecular theory wherein vast aggregates of items were handled, so many in fact that they couldn't be counted. How could you handle that? The answer came swiftly—probability! Insurance and business firms found that what they were doing was identical with the "laws of chance." Statistics blossomed, and now the whole field of science is pervade with the tools designed to investigate the laws of chance and gambling.

Now that probability is respectable we encounter it everywhere. And we recognize it even in the most common things. Every time we act we almost inevitably act on chance. It may be a very strong chance—its probability is high—but it is chance never-the-less. We may not have all the information, but we act anyway—we take a chance!

MICROSCOPIC MICROPHONE

By Tom Lynch

ULTRA-SONIC waves, those whose frequency is so high as to make them inaudible to the human ear, are widely used in submarine and general underwater work, much in the manner of radar, for tracking down other vessels, and for locating barriers and inimical objects. Probably to date this is the greatest use for ultra-sonic waves though other applications are found in modern laboratory work.

The common way of generating these waves is by the rapid electrically-induce oscillation of a crystal or an iron core. This offers no problem these days and the generation of ultra-sonic waves is standardized. But the detection or picking-up of these waves is something else again. This is rather tricky.

Microphones much like those used in conventional sound-work are the common detectors. Coupled with a hydrophonic pick-up device these microphones work fairly well. But they are not particularly sensitive and they frequently introduce spurious sounds of their own making after the sound has been transformed into an audible one or a visible trace on an oscillograph screen.

An ingenious discovery has simplified this side of the picture also. It has been learned that if a wire wrapped in an insulator is suspended in the water through which the ultra-sonic waves are travelling, a voltage is induced directly in the wire and in proportion to the magnitude, direction and intensity of the super-sound! It is much as if a radio wave had passed over the wire. This induced voltage may easily be amplified and fed to the receiving apparatus. Since the wire may be extremely minute, a lot of bulky, water-interferent hydrophonic gadgets may be eliminated from the pick-up equipment. As has been amply demonstrated in the past, miniaturization of equipment pays off in every way.

The technical explanation of this phenomenon hasn't yet been given but unquestionably it has something to do with the molecular and atomic arrangements of both wire and insulator as well as the properties of the surrounding salt water. It has been found that the induced voltage varies with changes in any of these three parameters.

By extension, in some fashion this discovery may be extended to sound of ordinary frequencies. Microphones are small now, but they may get small enough to fit in a gnat's ear—literally!

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King Vuar sent his Lord Sorcerer to obtain

THE EYE OF TANDYLA

But even magic doesn't prevail against a mad queen

By L. Sprague de Camp

ONE DAY—so long ago that mountains have arisen since, with cities on their flanks—

Derezong Taash, sorcerer to King Vuar the capricious, sat in his library reading the Collected Fragments of Lontang and drinking the green wine of Zhysk. He was at peace with himself and the world, for nobody had tried to murder him for ten whole days, by natural means or otherwise. When tired of puzzling out the cryptic glyphs, Derezong would gaze over the rim of his goblet at his demon-screen, on which the great Shuazid (before King Vuar took a capricious dislike to him) had depicted Derezong's entire stable of demons, from the fearful Fernazot down to the slightest sprite that submitted to his summons.

One wondered, on seeing Derezong, why even a sprite should bother. For Derezong Taash was a chubby little man (little for a Lorska, that is) with white hair framing a round youthful face. When he had undergone the zompur-treatment, he had carelessly forgotten to name his hair among the things for which he wanted eternal youth—an omission which had furnished his fellow magicians with fair scope for ribald ridicule.

On this occasion, Derezong Taash planned, when drunk enough, to heave his pudgy form out of the reading-chair and totter in to dinner with his assistant, Zhamel Seh. Four of Derezong's sons should serve the food as a precaution against Derezong's ill-wishers, and Zhamel Seh should taste it first as a further precaution. After they had consumed a few jars more of wine, Derezong would choose three of his prettiest concubines and stagger off to bed. A harmless program, one would have said. In fact Derezong Taash had already, in his mind, chosen the three, though he had not yet decided upon their order.

And then the knock upon the door and the high voice of King Vuar's most insolent page: "My lord sorcerer, the king will see you forthwith!"

"What about?" grumbled Derezong Taash.

"Do I know where the storks go in winter? Am I privy to the secrets of the living dead of Sedo? Has the North Wind confided to me what lies beyond the ramparts of the Riphai?"

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The eyes peered clearly out of the surrounding mist, and an eery cold wind filled the room

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"I suppose not." Derezong yawned, rose, and toddled throneward. He glanced back over his shoulders as he went, disliking to walk through the halls of the palace without Zhamel to guard his back against a sudden stab.

The lamplight gleamed upon King Vuar's glabrous pate, and the king looked up at Derezong Taash from under his hedge of heavy brows. He sat upon his throne in the audience chamber, and over his head upon the wall was fastened the hunting-horn of the great King Zynah, Vuar's father. On the secondary throne sat the king's favorite concubine Ilepro, from Lotor: a dumpy middle-aged Lotri, hairy and toothy. What the king saw in her... Perhaps in middle age he had become bored with beauty and sought spice from its antithesis. Or perhaps after the High Chief of Lotor, Konesp, had practically forced his widowed sister upon the king after Ilepro's husband had died of a hunting accident, the monarch had fallen truly in love with her.

OR PERHAPS the hand of the wizard-priest of Lotor was to be discerned behind these bizarre events. Sorcery or its equivalent would be needed to account for King Vuar's designating Ilepro's young son by her Lotri husband as his heir, if indeed he had done so as rumor whispered. Derezong was thankful that the youth was not present, though that quartet of Lotri women, swathed in their superfluous furs, squatted around the feet of Ilepro.

Derezong was sure there was something here that he did not understand, and that he would not like any better when he did understand it. Despite the present peace-treaty between Lotor and Lorsk, he doubted that the Lotris had forgotten the harrying that King Zynah had inflicted upon them in retaliation for their raids.

After his preliminary prostration, Derezong Taash observed something else that had escaped his original notice: that on a small table in front of the throne, which usually bore a vase of flowers, there now reposed a silver plate, and on the plate the head of the Minister of Commerce, wearing that witlessly blank expression that heads are wont to do when separated from their proper bodies.

Evidently King Vuar was not in his jolliest mood.

"Yes, O King?" said Derezong Taash, his eyes swivelling nervously from the head of the late minister to that of his sovereign.

King Vuar said: "Good my lord, my concubine Ilepro, whom I think you know, has a desire that you alone can satisfy."

"Yes, Sire?" Jumping to a wrong conclusion, Derezong Taash goggled like a bullfrog in spring. For one thing, King Vuar was not at all noted for generosity in sharing his women, and for another thing, of all the royal harem, Derezong had the least desire to share Ilepro.

The king said: "She wishes that jewel that forms the third eye of the goddess Tandyla. You know that temple in Lotor?"

"Yes, Sire." Although he retained his blandest smile, Derezong's heart sank to the vicinity of his knees. This was going to prove even less entertaining than intimacy with Ilepro.

"This small-souled buckster," said Vuar, indicating the head, "said, when I put the proposal to him, that the gem could not be bought, wherefore I caused his length to be lessened. This hasty act I now regret, for it transpires that he was right. Therefore, our only remaining course is to steal the thing."

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"Y-yes, Sire."

The king rested his long chin upon his fist and his agate eyes saw distant things. The lamplight gleamed upon the ring of gray metal on his finger, a ring made from the heart of a falling star, and of such might as a magic-repellant that not even the sendings of the wizards of Lotor had power to harm its wearer.

He continued: "We can either essay to seize it openly, which would mean war, or by stealth. Now, although I will go to some trouble to gratify the whims of Ilepro, my plans do not include a Lotrian war. At least, not until all other expedients have been attempted. You, therefore, are hereby commissioned to go to Lotor and obtain this jewel."

"Yes indeed, Sire," said Derezong with a heartiness that was, to say the least, a bit forced. Any thoughts of protest that he might have entertained had some minutes since been banished by the sight of the unlucky minister's head.

"Of course," said Vuar in tones of friendly consideration, "should you feel your own powers inadequate, I'm sure the King of Zhysk will lend me his wizard to assist you...."

"Never, Sire!" cried Derezong, drawing himself up to his full five-five. "That bungling beetlehead, far from helping, would be but an anchor stone about my neck!"

King Vuar smiled a lupine smile, though Derezong could not perceive the reason. "So be it, then."

BACK IN his own quarters Derezong Taash rang for his assistant. After the third ring Zhamel Seh sauntered in, balancing his big bronze sword by the pommel on his palm.

"Some day," said Derezong, "you'll amputate some poor wight's toe showing off that trick, and I only hope it will be yours. We leave tomorrow on a mission."

Zhamel Seh grasped his sword securely by the hilt and grinned down upon his employer. "Good! Whither?"

Derezong Taash told him.

"Better yet! Action! Excitement!" Zhamel swished the air with his sword. "Since you put the geas upon the queen's mother have we sat in these apartments like barnacles on a pile, doing nought to earn King Vuar's bounty."

"What's wrong with that? I plague none and nobody plagues me. And now with winter coming on, we must journey forth to the ends of rocky Lotor to try to lift this worthless bauble the king's sack of a favorite has set her silly heart upon."

"I wonder why?" said Zhamel. "Since she's Lotri by birth, you'd think she'd wish to ward her land's religious symbols instead of raping them away for her own adornment."

"One never knows. Our own women are unpredictable enough, and as for Lotris... But let's to the task of planning our course and equipage."

That night, Derezong Taash took only one concubine to bed with him.

THEY RODE east to fertile Zhysk on the shores of the Tritonian Sea, and in the city of Bienkar sought out Derezong's friend, Goshap Tuzh the lapidary, from whom they solicited information to forearm them against adversity.

"This jewel," said Goshap Tuzh, "is about the size of a small fist, egg-shaped without facets, and of a dark purple hue. When seen from one end, it displays rays like a sapphire, but seven instead of six. It forms the pupil of the central eye of the statue of Tandyla, being held in place by leaden prongs. As to what other means, natural or otherwise, the priests of

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Tandyla employ to guard their treasure, I know not, save that they are both effective and unpleasing. Twenty-three attempts have been made to pilfer the stone in the last five centuries, all terminating fatally for the thieves. The last time I, Goshap Tuzh, saw the body of the thief..."

As Goshap told the manner in which the unsuccessful thief had been used, Zhamel gagged and Derezong looked into his wine with an expression of distaste, as if some many-legged creeping thing swam therein—although he and his assistant were by no means the softest characters in a hard age.

"Its properties?" said Derezong Taash.

"Considerable, though perhaps overrated by distant rumor. It is the world's most sovereign antidemonic, repelling even the dread Tr'lang himself, who is of all demons the deadliest."

"Is it even stronger than King Vuar's ring of star-metal?"

"Much. However, for our old friendship, let me advise you to change your name and take service with some less exacting liege lord. There's no profit in seeking to snatch this Eye."

Derezong Taash ran his fingers through his silky-white hair and beard. "True, he ever wounds me by his brutally voiced suspicions of my competence, but to relinquish such luxe as I enjoy were not so simple. Where else can I obtain such priceless books and enrapturing women for the asking? Nay, save when he becomes seized of these whimsies, King Vuar's a very good master indeed."

"But that's my point. When do you know his caprice notorious may not be turned against you?"

"I know not; betimes I think it must be easier to serve a barbarian king. Barbarians, being wrapped in a mummy-cloth of custom and ritual, are more predictable."

"Then why not flee? Across the Tritonian Sea lies lordly Torrutseish, where one of your worth would soon rise—"

"You forget," said Derezong, "King Vuar holds hostages: my not inconsiderable family of fourteen concubines, twelve sons, nine daughters, and several squalling grandchildren. And for them I must stick it out, though the Western Sea swallow the entire land of Pusaad as is predicted in the prophecies."

Goshap shrugged. "'Tis your affair. I do but indigitate that you are one of these awkward intermediates: Too tub-like ever to make a prow swordsman, and unable to attain the highest grade of magical adeptry because you'll not forswear the delights of your zenana."

"Thank you, good Goshap," said Derezong, sipping the green wine. "Howsoever, I live not to attain preeminence in some austere regimen disciplinary, but to enjoy life. And now who's a reliable apothecary in Biekar from whom I can obtain a packet of syr-powder of highest grade and purity?"

"Dualor can furnish you. What semblance do you propose upon yourselves to cast?"

"I thought we'd go as a pair of traders from Parsk. So, if you hear of such a couple traversing Lotor accompanied by vast uproar and vociferation, fail not to show the due surprise."

DEREZONG TAASH bought his syr-powder with squares of gold bearing the stamp of King Vuar, then returned to their inn where he drew his pentacles and cast his powder and

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recited the Incantation of the Nines. At the end, both he and Zhamel Seh were both lying helpless on the floor, with their appearance changed to that of a pair of dark hawk-nosed fellows in the fluttery garb of Parsk, with rings in their ears.

When they recovered their strength, they rode forth. They crossed the desert of Reshape without suffering excessively either from thirst, or from the bites of venomous serpents, or from attacks of spirits of the waste. They passed through the Forest of Antro without being assailed by brigands, swordtoothed cats, or the Witch of Antro. And at last they wound among the iron hills of Lator.

As they stopped for one night, Derezong said: "By my reckoning and according to what passersby have told us, the temple should lie not more than one day's journey ahead. Hence, it were time to try whether we can effect our direption by surrogate instead of in our own vulnerable persons." And he began drawing pentacles in the dirt.

"You mean to call up Feranzot?" asked Zhamel Seh.

"The same."

Zhamel shuddered. "Some day you'll leave an angle of a pentacle unclosed, and that will be the end of us."

"No doubt. But to assail this stronghold of powers chthonian by any but the mightiest means were an even surer passport to extinction. So light the rushes and begin."

"I can fancy nothing riskier than dealing with Feranzot," grumbled Zhamel, "save perhaps invoking the terrible Tr'lang himself." But he did as he was bid.

They went through the Incantation of Br'tong, as reconstructed by Derezong Taash from the Fragments of Lontang, and the dark shape of Feranzot appeared outside the main pentacle, wavering and rippling. Derezong felt the heat of his body sucked forth by the cold of the daev, and felt the overwhelming depression the thing's presence engendered. Zhamel Seh, for all his thews, cowered.

"What would you?" whispered Feranzot.

Derezong Taash gathered his weakened forces and replied: "You shall steal the jewel in the middle eye of the statue of the goddess Tandyla in the nearby temple thereof and render it to me."

"That I cannot."

"And why not?"

"First, because the priests of Tandyla have traced around their temple a circle of such puissance that no sending or semblance or spirit, save the great Tr'lang, can cross it. Second, because the Eye itself is surrounded by an aura of such baleful influence that not I, nor any other of my kind, nor even Tr'lang himself, can exert a purchase upon it on this plane. May I return to my own dimension now?"

"Depart, depart, depart... Well, Zhamel, it looks as though we should be compelled to essay this undelightsome task ourselves."

NEXT DAY they continued their ride. The hills became mountains of uncommon ruggedness, and the road a mere trail cut into cliffs of excessive steepness. The horses, more accustomed to the bison-swarming plains of windy Lorsk, misliked the new topography, and rubbed their riders' legs painfully against the cliffside in their endeavor to keep away from the edge.

Little sun penetrated these gorges of black rock, which began to darken almost immediately after noon. Then the sky clouded over and the rocks became shiny with cold mist. The

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trail crossed the gorge by a spidery bridge suspended from ropes. The horses balked.

"Not that I blame them," said Derezong Taash, dismounting. "By the red-hot talons of Vrazh, it takes the thought of my fairest concubine to nerve me to cross!"

When led in line with Zhamel belaboring their rumps from the rear, the animals crossed, though unwillingly. Derezong, towing them, took one brief look over the side of the bridge at the white thread of water foaming far below and decided not to do that again. Feet and hooves resounded hollowly on the planking and echoed from the cliffsides, and the wind played with the ropes as with the strings of a great harp.

On the other side of the gorge, the road continued its winding upward way. They passed another pair, a man and a woman, riding down the trail, and had to back around a bend to find a place with room enough to pass. The man and the woman went by looking somberly at the ground, barely acknowledging with the grunt the cheerful greeting Derezong tossed at them.

Then the road turned sharply into a great cleft in the cliff, wherein their hooffalls echoed thrice as loud as life and they could scarcely see to pick their way. The bottom of the cleft sloped upward, so that in time they came out upon an area of tumbled stones with a few dwarfed trees. The road ran dimly on through the stones until it ended in a flight of steps, which in turn led up to the Temple of Tandyla itself. Of this temple of ill repute, the travellers could see only the lower parts, for the upper ones disappeared into the cloud floor. What they could see of it was all black and shiny and rising to sharp peaks.

Derezong remembered the unpleasant attributes ascribed to the goddess, and the even more disagreeable habits credited to her priests. It was said, for instance, that the worship of Tandyla, surely a sinister enough figure in the Pusaadian pantheon, was a mere blind to cover dark rites concerning the demon Tr'lang, who in elder days had been a god in his own right. That was before the towering Lorskas, driven from the mainland by the conquering Hauskirik, had swarmed across the Tritonian Sea to Pusaad, before that land had begun its ominous subsidence.

DEREZONG TAASH assured himself that gods and demons alike were not usually so formidable as their priests, from base motives of gain, tried to make them out. Also, that wild tales of the habits of priests usually turned out to be at least somewhat exaggerated. Although he did not fully believe his own assurances, they would have to suffice for want of better.

In front of the half-hidden temple, Derezong Taash pulled up, dismounted, and with Zhamel's help weighted down the reins of their beasts with heavy stones to hinder them from straying.

As they started for the steps Zhamel cried: "Master!"

"What is't?"

"Look upon us!"

Derezong looked and saw that the semblance of traders from Parsk had vanished, and that they were again King Vuar's court magician and his assistant, plain for all to see. They must have stepped across that line that Fernazot had warned them of.

Derezong took a sharp look at the entrance, and half-hidden in the inadequate light he saw two men flanking the doorway. His eye caught the gleam of polished bronze. But if these doorkeepers had observed the change

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in the looks of the visitors, they gave no sign.

Derezong Taash drove his short legs up the shiny black steps. The guards came into full view, thick-bodied Lotris with beetling brows. Men said they were akin to the savages of Ierarne in the far Northeast, who knew not horse-taming and fought with sharpened stone. These stood staring straight ahead, each facing the other like statues. Derezong and Zhamel passed between them.

They found themselves in a vestibule where a pair of young Lotri girls said: "Your boots and swords, sirs."

Derezong lifted off his baldric and handed it to the nearest, scabbard and all; then pulled off his boots and stood barefoot with the grass he had stuffed into them to keep them from chafing sticking out from between his toes. He was glad to feel the second sword hanging down his back inside his shirt.

A low remark passed between Zhamel and one of the girls—a girl who, Derezong observed, was not bad-looking for a Lotri, in a plump moon-faced way.

"Come on," said Derezong Taash, and led the way into the naos of the temple.

It was much like other temples: a big rectangular room smelling of incense, with a third of the area partitioned off by a railing, behind which rose the huge black squat statue of Tandyla. The smooth basalt of which it was carved reflected feebly the highlights from the few lamps, and up at the top, where its head disappeared into the shadows, a point of purple light showed where the jewel in its forehead caught the rays.

A couple of Lotris knelt before the railing, mumbling prayers. A priest appeared from the shadows on one side, waddled across the naos behind the railing. Derezong half expected the priest to turn on him with a demand that he and Zhamel follow him into the sanctum of the high priest, but the priest kept on walking and disappeared into the darkness on the other side.

DEREZONG TAASH and his companion advanced, a slow step at a time, towards the railing. As they neared it, the two Lotris completed their devotions and rose. One of them dropped something that jingled into a large tub-like receptacle behind the railing, and the two squat figures walked quickly out.

For the moment, Derezong and Zhamel were entirely alone in the big room, though in the silence they could hear faint motions and voices from other parts of the temple. Derezong brought out his container of syr-powder and sprinkled it while racing through the Incantation of Ansuan. When he finished, there stood between himself and Zhamel a replica of himself.

Derezong Taash climbed over the railing and trotted on the tips of his plump toes around behind the statue. Here in the shadows, he could see doors in the walls. The statue sat with its back almost but not quite touching the wall behind it, so that an active man, by bracing his back against the statue and his feet against the wall, could lever himself up. Though Derezong was "active" only in a qualified sense, he slipped into the gap and squirmed into a snugly-fitting fold in the goddess's stone draperies. Here he lay, hardly breathing, until he heard Zhamel's footfalls die away.

The plan was that Zhamel should walk out of the temple, accompanied by the double of Derezong. The guards, believing that the temple was now deserted of visitors, would relax.

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Derezong would steal the stone; Zhamel should raise a haro outside, urging the guards to "Come quickly!" and while their attention was thus distracted, Derezong would rush out.

Derezong waited a while longer. The soft footsteps of another priest padded past and a door closed. Somewhere, a Lotri girl laughed.

Derezong Taash began to worm his way up between the statue and the wall. It was hard going for one of his girth, and sweat ran out from under his cap of fisher-fur and down his face. Still no interruption.

He arrived on a level with the shoulder and squirmed out on to that projection, holding the right ear for safety. The slick stone was cold under his bare feet. By craning his neck, he could see the ill-favored face of the goddess in profile, and by stretching he could reach the jewel in her forehead.

DEREZONG TAASH took out of his tunic a small bronze pry-bar he had brought along for this purpose. With it he began to pry up the leaden prongs that held the gem in place, carefully lest he mar the stone or cause it to fall to the floor below. Every few pries, he tested it with his finger. Soon it felt loose.

The temple was quiet.

Around the clock he went with his little bar, prying. Then the stone came out, rubbing gently against the smooth inner surfaces of the bent-out leaden prongs. Derezong Taash reached for the inside of his tunic, to hide the stone and the bar. But the two objects proved too much for his pudgy fingers to handle at once. The bar came loose and fell with a loud ping—ping down the front of the statue, bouncing from breast to belly to lap, to end with a sonorous clank on the stone floor in front of the image.

Derezong Taash fronze rigid. Seconds passed and nothing happened. Surely the guards had heard...

But still there was silence.

Derezong Taash secured the jewel in his tunic and squirmed back over the shoulder to the darkness behind the statue. Little by little, he slid down the space between statue and wall. He reached the floor. Still no noise save an occasional faint sound such as might have been made by the temple servants preparing dinner for their masters. He waited for the diversion promised by Zhamel Seh.

He waited and waited. From somewhere came the screech of a man in the last agonies.

At last, giving up, Derezong Taash hurried around the hip of the statue. He scooped up the pry-bar with one quick motion, climbed back over the railing, and tiptoed toward the exit.

There stood the guards with swords out, ready for him.

Derezong Taash reached back over his shoulder and pulled out his second sword. In a real fight, he knew he would have little hope against one hardened and experienced sword-fighter, let alone two. His one slim chance lay in bursting through them by a sudden berserk attack and keeping on running.

He expected such adroit and skillful warriors to separate and come at him from opposite sides. Instead, one of them stepped forward and took an awkward swipe at him. Derezong parried with a clash of bronze and struck back. Clang! clang! went the blades, and then his foe staggered back, dropped his sword with a clatter, clutched both hands to his chest, and folded up in a heap on the floor. Derezong was astonished; he could have sworn he had not gotten home.

Then the other man was upon him. At the second clash of blades, that of the guard spun out of his hand, to fall ringingly to the stone pave. The guard

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leaped back, turned and ran, disappearing through one of the many ambient doors.

DEREZONG TAASH glanced at his sword, wondering if he had not known his own strength all this time. The whole exchange had taken perhaps ten seconds, and so far as he could tell in the dim light, no blood besmeared his blade. He was tempted to test the deadness of the fallen guard by poking him, but lacked both time and ruthlessness to do so. Instead, he ran out of the vestibule and looked for Zhamel and the double of himself.

No sign of either. The four horses were still tethered a score of paces from the steps of the temple. The stones were sharp under Derezong's bare and unhardened soles.

Derezong hesitated, but only for a flash. He was in a way fond of Zhamel Seh, and his assistant's brawn had gotten him out of trouble about as often as Zhamel's lack of insight had gotten them into it. On the other hand, to plunge back into the temple in search of his erratic aide would be rash to the point of madness. And he did have definite orders from the king.

He sheathed his sword, scrambled on to the back of his horse, and cantered off, leading the other three beasts by their bridles.

During the ride down the narrow cleft, Derezong had time to think, and the more he thought the less he liked what he thought. The behavior of the guards was inexplicable on any grounds but their being drunk or crazy, and he did not believe either. Their failure to attack him simultaneously; their failure to note the fall of the pry-bar; the ease with which he, an indifferent swordsman, had bested them; the fact that one fell down without being touched; their failure to yell for help...

Unless they planned it that way. The whole thing had been too easy to account for by any other hypothesis. Maybe they wanted him to steal the accursed bauble.

At the lower end of the cleft, where the road turned out on to the side of the cliff forming the main gorge, he pulled up, dismounted, and tied the animals, keeping an ear cocked for the sound of pursuers echoing down the cleft. He took out the Eye of Tandyla and looked at it. Yes, when seen end-on it showed the rayed effect promised by Goshap Tuzh. Otherwise, it exhibited no special odd or unnatural properties. So far.

Derezong Taash set it carefully on the ground and backed away from it to see it from a greater distance. As he backed, the stone moved slightly and started to roll towards him.

AT FIRST he thought he had not laid it down on a level enough place, and leaped to seize it before it should roll over the edge into the gulf. He put it back and heaped a little barrier of pebbles and dust around it. Now it should not roll!

But when he backed again it did, right over his little rampart. Derezong Taash began to sweat anew, and not, this time, from physical exertion. The stone rolled toward him, faster and faster. He tried to dodge by shrinking into a recess in the cliff-wall. The stone swerved and came to rest at the toe of one of his bare feet, like a pet animal asking for a pat on the head.

He scooped out a small hole, laid the gem in it, placed a large stone over the hole, and walked away. The large stone shook and the purple egg appeared, pushing aside the pebbles in its path as if it were being pulled out from under the rock by an invisible cord. It rolled to his feet again and stopped.

Derezong Taash picked up the stone

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and looked at it again. It did not seem to have been scratched. He remembered the urgency with which Chief Konesp was said to have pressed his sister upon King Vuar, and the fact that the demand for the stone originated with this same Ilepro.

With a sudden burst of emotion, Derezong Taash threw the stone from him, towards the far side of the gorge.

By all calculation, the gem should have followed a curved path, arching downward to shatter against the opposite cliff. Instead, it slowed in midflight over the gorge, looped back, and flew into the hand that had just thrown it.

Derezong Taash did not doubt that the priests of Tandyla had laid a subtle trap for King Vuar in the form of this jewel. What it would do to the king and to the kingdom of Lorsk if Derezong carried out his mission, he had no idea. So far as he knew, it was merely an antidemonic, and therefore should protect Vuar instead of harming him. Nevertheless, he was sure something unpleasant was planned, of which he was less than eager to be the agency. He placed the gem on a flat rock, found a stone the size of his head, raised it in both hands, and brought it down upon the jewel.

Or so he intended. On the way down, the stone struck a projecting shelf of rock, and a second later Derezong was capering about like a devil-dancer of Dzen, sucking his mashed fingers and cursing the priests of Tandyla in the names of the most fearful demons in his repertory. The stone lay unharmed.

For, Derezong reasoned, these priests must have put upon the gem not only a following-spell, but also the Incantation of Duzhateng, so that every effort on the part of Derezong to destroy the object would rebound to his own damage. If he essayed some more elaborate scheme of destruction, he would probably end up with a broken leg. The Incantation of Duzhateng could be lifted only by a complicated spell for which Derezong did not have the materials, which included some very odd and repellant substances indeed.

NOW, DEREZONG TAASH knew that there was only one way in which he could both neutralize these spells and secure the jewel so that it should plague him no more, and that was to put it back in the hole in the forehead of the statue of Tandyla and hammer down the leaden prongs that held it in its setting. Which task, however, promised to present more difficulties than the original theft. For if the priests of Tandyla had meant Derezong to steal the object, they might show greater acumen in thwarting his attempt to return it, than they had in guarding it in the first place.

One could but try. Derezong Taash put the jewel into his tunic, mounted his horse (leaving the other three still tethered) and rode back up the echoing cleft. When he came out upon the little plateau upon which squatted the temple of Tandyla, he saw that he had indeed been forestalled. Around the entrance to the temple stood a double row of guards, the bronze scales of their cuirasses glimmering faintly in the fading light. The front rank carried shields of mammoth hide and big bronze swords, while those in the rear bore long pikes which they held in both hands and thrust between the men of the front rank. They thus presented a formidable hedge to any attacker, who had first to get past the spear-points and then deal with the swords.

One possibility was to gallop at them in the hope that one or two directly in one's way would flinch aside, opening a path by which one could burst through the serried line. Then,

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one could ride on into the temple and perhaps get the gem back into place before being caught up with. If not, there would be a great smash, some battered guards, a wounded horse, and a thoroughly skewered and sliced sorcerer all tangled in a kicking heap.

Derezong Taash hesitated, then thought of his precious manuscripts and adorable concubines awaiting him in King Vuar's palace, which he could never safely enter again unless he brought either the gem or an acceptable excuse for not having it. He kicked his mount into motion.

As the animal cantered toward the line, the spear-points got closer and larger and sharper-looking, and Derezong Taash saw that the guards were not going to flinch aside and obligingly let him through. Then, a figure came out of the temple and ran down the steps to the rear of the guards. It wore a priest's robe, but just before the shock of impact Derezong recognized the rugged features of Zhamel Seh.

DEREZONG TAASH hauled on his reins, and the horse skidded to a halt with its nose a scant span from the nearest point. Derezong—living in a stirrupless age—slid forward until he bestrode the animal's neck. Clutching its mane with his left hand, he felt for the gem with his right.

"Zhamel!" he called. "Catch!"

He threw. Zhamel leaped high and caught the stone before it had time to loop back.

"Now put it back!" cried Derezong.

"What? Art mad?"

"Put it back, speedily, and secure it!"

Zhamel, trained to obey commands no matter how bizarre, dashed back into the temple, albeit wagging his head as if in sorrow for his master's loss of sanity. Derezong Taash untangled himself from his horse's mane and pulled the beast back out of reach of the spears. Under their lacquered helmets, the heads of the guards turned this way and that in evident perplexity. Derezong surmised that they had been given one simple order—to keep him out—and that they had not been told how to cope with fraternization between the stranger and one of their own priests.

As the guards did not seem to be coming after him, Derezong sat on his horse, eyes on the portal. He'd give Zhamel a fair chance to accomplish his mission and escape, though he thought little of the youth's chances. If Zhamel tried to push or cut his way through the guards, they would make mincemeat of him, unarmored as he was. And he, Derezong, would have to find and train another assistant, who would probably prove as unsatisfactory as his predecessor. Still, Derezong could not leave the boy utterly to his fate.

Then, Zhamel Seh ran down the steps carrying a long pike of the kind held by the rear-rank guards. Holding this pike level, he ran at the guards as though he were about to spear one in the back. Derezong, knowing that such a scheme would not work, shut his eyes.

But just before he reached the guards, Zhamel Seh dug the point of the pike into the ground and pole-vaulted. Up he went, legs jerking and dangling like those of a man being hanged, over the lacquered helmets and the bronze swords and the mammoth hide shields. He came down in front of the guards, breaking one of their pikes with a loud snap, rolled to his feet, and ran towards Derezong Taash. The latter had already turned his horse around.

AS ZHAMEL caught hold of the edge of the saddle pad, an uproar arose behind them as priests ran

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out of the temple shouting. Derezong drummed with his bare heels on the stallion's ribs and set off at a canter, Zhamel swinging along in great leaps beside him. They wended their way down the cleft while the sound of hooves wafted after them.

Derezong Taash wasted no breath in questions while picking his way down the trail. At the bottom, where the cleft ended on one side of the great gorge, they halted for Zhamel to mount his own horse, then continued on as fast as they dared. The echoes of the pursuers' hooves came down the cleft with a deafening clatter.

"My poor feet!" groaned Zhamel Seh.

At the suspension-bridge, the horses balked again, but Derezong mercilessly pricked and slapped his mount with his sword until the beast trotted out upon the swaying walkway. The cold wind hummed through the ropes and the daylight was almost gone.

At the far end, with a great sigh of relief, Derezong Taash looked back. Down the cliffside road came a line of pursuers, riding at reckless speed.

He said: "Had I but time and materials, I'd cast a spell on yonder bridge that should make it look as 'twere broken and dangling useless."

"What's wrong with making it broken and useless in very truth?" cried Zhamel, pulling his horse up against the cliffside and hoisting himself so that he stood upon his saddle.

He swung his sword at the cables. As the first of the pursuers reached the far side of the bridge, the structure sagged and fell away with a great swish of ropes and clatter of planks. The men from the temple set up an outcry, and an arrow whizzed across the gap to shatter against the rock. Derezong and Zhamel resumed their journey.

A FORTNIGHT later, they sat in the garden back of the shop of Goshap Tuzh the lapidary in sunny Bienkar. Zhamel Seh told his part of the tale:

"...so on my way out, this little Lotri cast her orbs upon me once again. Now, thought I, there'll be time in plenty to perform the Master's work and make myself agreeable in this quarter as well—"

"Young cullion!" growled Derezong into his wine.

"—so I followed her. And in truth all was going in most propitious and agreeable wise, when who should come in but one of these chinless wonders in cowl and robe, and went for me with a knife. I tried to fend the fellow off, and fear that in the fracas his neck by ill hap got broke. So, knowing there might be trouble, I borrowed his habit and sallied forth therein, to find that Master, horses, and Master's double had all gone."

"And how time had flown!" said Derezong Taash in sarcastic tones. "I trust at least that the young Lotri has cause to remember this episode with pleasure. The double no doubt, being a mere thing of shadow and not a being rational, walked straight out and vanished when it crossed the magical barrier erected by the priests."

"And," continued Zhamel, "there were priests and guards rushing about chittering like a pack of monkeys. I rushed about as if I were one of them, saw them range the guards around the portal, and then the Master returned and threw me the stone. I grasped the situation, swarmed up the statue, popped Tandyla's third eye back into its socket, and hammered the prongs in upon it with the pommel of my dagger. Then I fetched a pike from the armory, pausing but to knock senseless a couple of Lotris who sought to detain me for interrogation, and

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you know the rest."

DEREZONG TAASH rounded out the story and said: "Good Goshap, perhance you can advise our next course, for I fear that should we present ourselves before King Vuar in proper persons, without the gem, he'd have our heads set tastefully on silver platters ere we our explanation finished. No doubt, remorse would afterwards o'erwhelm him, but that would help us not."

"Since he holds you in despite, why not leave him, as I've urged before?" said Goshap.

Derezong Taash shrugged. "Others, alas, show a like lack of appreciation, and would prove no easier masters. For had these priests of Tandyla confided in my ability to perform a simple task like carrying their gemstone from Lotor to Lorsk, their plot would doubtless have borne its intended fruit. But fearing lest I should lose or sell it on the way, they put a supernumerary spell upon it—"

"How could they, when the stone has anti-magical properties?"

"Its anti-magical properties comprise simple antidemonism, whereas the following-spell and the Incantation of Duzhateng are sympathetic magic, not sorcerous. At any rate, they caused it to follow me hither and thither, thus arousing my already awakened suspicions to the fever-pitch." He sighed and took a pull on the green wine. "What this sorry world needs is more confidence. But say on, Goshap."

"Well, then, why not write him a letter setting forth the circumstances? I'll lend you a slave to convey it to Lorsk in advance of your persons, so that when you arrive, King Vuar's wrath shall have subsided."

Derezong pondered. "Sage though I deem your suggestion, it faces one obstacle insurmountable. Namely: That of all the men at the court of Lorsk, but six can read; and among these King Vuar is not numbered. Whereas of the six, at least five are among my enemies, who'd like nought better than to see me tumbled from my place. And should the task of reading my missive to the king devolve on one of these, you can fancy how he'd distort my harmless pictographs to my discredit. Could we trick old Vuar into thinking we'd performed our task, as by passing off on him a stone similar to that he expects of us? Know you of such?"

"Now there," said Goshap, "is a proposal indeed. Let me cogitate... Last year, when the bony specter of want came upon the land, King Daior placed his best crown in pawn to the Temple of Kelk, for treasure wherewith to still the clamorings of his people. Now, this crown bears at its apex a purple star sapphire of wondrous size and fineness, said to have been shaped by the gods before the Creation for their own enjoyment, and being in magnitude and hue not unlike that which forms the Eye of Tandyla. And the gem has never been redeemed, wherefore the priests of Kelk have set the crown on exhibition, thereby mulcting the curious of further offerings. But as to how this well-guarded gem shall be transferred from this crown to your possession, ask me not, and in truth I had liefer know nought of the matter."

NEXT DAY, Derezong Taash cast upon himself and Zhamel Seh the likeness of Atlantes, from the misty mountain range in the desert of Gautha, far to the East across the Tritonian Sea, where it was said in Pusaad that there were men with snakes for legs and others with no heads but faces in their chests.

Zhamel Seh grumbled: "What are we, magicians or thieves? Perhaps if

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we succeed in this, the King of Torrutseish across the Tritonian Sea has some bauble he specially fancies, that we could rob him of."

Derezong Taash did not argue the point, but led the way to the square fronted by the Temple of Kelk. They strode up to the temple with the Atlantean swagger, and into where the crown lay upon a cushion on a table with a lamp to illuminate it and two seven-foot Lorskas to guard it, one with a drawn sword and the other with a nocked arrow. The guards looked down over their great black beards at the red-haired Atlanteans in their blue cloaks and armlets of orichalc who pointed and jabbered as they saw the crown. And then the shorter Atlantean, that was Derezong Taash beneath the illusion, wandered out, leaving the other to gape.

Scarcely had the shorter Atlas passed the portal than he gave a loud squawk. The guards, looking that way, saw his head in profile projecting past the edge of the doorway and looking upward as though his body were being bent backward, while a pair of hands gripped his throat.

The guards, not knowing that Derezong was strangling himself, rushed to the portal. As they neared it, the head of the assailed Atlantean disappeared from view, and they arrived to find Derezong Taash in his proper form strolling up to the entrance. All the while behind them the powerful fingers of Zhamel Seh pried loose the stone from King Dairo's crown.

"Is aught amiss, sirs?" said Derezong to the guards, who stared about wildly as Zhamel Seh came out of the temple behind them. As he did so, he also dropped his Atlantean disguise and become another Lorska like the guards, though not quite so tall and bushy-bearded.

"If you seek an Atlas," said Derezong in answer to their questions, "I saw two such issue from your fane and slink off into yonder alley with furtive gait. Perhaps it behooves you to see whether they have committed some depredation in your hallowed precincts?"

As the guards rushed back into the temple to see, Derezong Taash and his assistant made off briskly in the opposite direction.

Zhamel Seh muttered: "At least, let's hope we shall not have to return this jewel to the place whence we obtained it!"

DEREZONG and Zhamel reached Lezohtr late at night, but had not even finished greeting their loving concubines when a messenger informed Derezong Taash that the king wanted him at once.

Derezong Taash found King Vuar in the audience room, evidently fresh-risen from his bed, for he wore nought but his crown and a bearskin wrapped about his bony body. Ilepro was there, too, clad with like informality, and with her were her ever-present Lotrian quartet.

"You have it?" said King Vuar, lifting a bushy brow that boded no good for a negative answer.

"Here, Sire," said Derezong, heaving himself up off the floor and advancing with the jewel from the crown of King Daior.

King Vuar took it in his finger-tips and looked at it in the light of the single lamp. Derezong Taash wondered if the king would think to count the rays to see if there were six or seven; but he reassured himself with the thought that King Vuar was notoriously weak in higher mathematics.

The king extended the jewel towards Ilepro. "Here, Madam," he said. "And let us hope that with this transaction ends your incessant plaint."

"My lord is as generous as the sun,"

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said Ilepro in her thick Lotrian accent. "'Tis true I have a little more to say, but not for servile ears." She spoke in Lotrian to her four attendants, who scuttled out.

"Well?" said the king.

Ilepro stared into the sapphire and made a motion with her free hand, meanwhile reciting something in her native tongue. Although she went too fast for Derezong Taash to understand, he caught a word, several times repeated, that shook him to the core. The word was "Tr'lang".

"Sire!" he cried. "I fear this northern witch is up to no good—"

"What?" roared King Vuar. "You vilipend my favorite, and before my very optics? I'll have your head—"

"But Sire! King! Look!"

The king broke into his tirade long enough to look, and never resumed it. For the flame of the lamp had shrunk to a bare spark. Cold eddies stirred the air of the room, in the midst of which the gloom thickened into shadow and the shadow into substance. At first, it seemed a shapeless darkness, a sable fog, but then a pair of glowing points appeared, palpable-eyes, at twice the height of a man.

Derezong's mind sought for exorcisms while his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth with terror. For his own Feranzot was but a kitten compared to this, and no pentacle protected him.

The eyes grew plainer, and lower down horny talons threw back faint highlights from the feeble flame of the lamp. The cold in the room was as if an iceberg had walked in, and Derezong smelt an odor as of burning feathers.

ILEPRO pointed at the king and cried something in her own language. Derezong thought he saw fangs as a great mouth opened and Tr'lang swept forward towards Ilepro. She held the jewel in front of her, as if to ward off the daev. But it paid no attention. As the blackness settled around her, she gave a piercing scream.

The door now flew open again and the four Lotri women rushed back in. Ilepro's screams continued, diminuendo, with a curious effect of distance, as if Tr'lang were dragging her far away. All that could be seen was a dwindling shapeless shape of shadow in the middle of the floor.

The foremost of the Lotris cried "Ilepro!" and sprang towards the shape, shedding wraps with one hand while tugging out a great bronze sword with the other. As the other three did likewise, Derezong Taash realized that they were not women at all, but burly male Lotris given a superficially feminine look by shaving their beards and padding their clothes in appropriate places.

The first of the four swung his sword through the place where the shape of Tr'lang had been, but without meeting resistance other than that of air. Then he turned toward the king and Derezong.

"Take these alive!" he said in Lotrian. "They shall stand surety for our safe departure."

The four moved forward, their swords ready and their free hands spread to clutch like the talons of the just-departed demon. Then the opposite door opened and in came Zhamel Seh with an armful of swords. Two he tossed to Derezong Taash and King Vuar, who caught them by the hilts; the third he gripped in his own large fist as he took his place beside the other two.

"Too late," said another Lotri. "Slay them and run's our only chance."

Suiting the deed to the declaration, he rushed upon the three Lorskas.

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Clang! Clang! went the swords as the seven men slashed and parried in the gloom. King Vuar had whirled his bearskin around his left arm for a shield and fought naked save for his crown. While the Lorskas had an advantage of reach, they were handicapped by the king's age and Derezong's embonpoint and mediocrity of swordsmanship.

Though Derezong cut and thrust nobly, he found himself pushed back towards a corner, and felt the sting of a flesh-wound in the shoulder. And whatever the ignorant might think of a wizard's powers, it was quite impossible to fight physically for one's life and cast a spell at the same time.

THE KING bellowed for help, but no answer came, for in these inner chambers the thick stone walls and hangings deadened sound before it reached the outer rooms of the palace where King Vuar's guards had their stations. Like the others, he, too, was driven back until the three were fighting shoulder to shoulder in the corner. A blade hit Derezong's head flatsides and made him dizzy, while a metallic sound told that another blow had gotten home on the king's crown, and a yelp from Zhamel Seh revealed that he also had been hurt.

Derezong Taash found himself fast tiring. Each breath was a labor, and the hilt was slippery in his aching fingers. Soon they'd beat down his guard and finish him, unless he found some more indirect shift by which to make head against them.

He threw his sword, not at the Lotri in front of him, but at the little lamp that flickered on the table. The lamp flew off with a clatter and went out as Derezong Taash dropped on all fours and crept after his sword. Behind him in the darkness he could hear the footsteps and the hard breathing of men, afraid to strike for fear of smithing a friend and afraid to speak lest they reveal themselves to a foe.

Derezong Taash felt along the wall until he came to the hunting-horn of King Zynah. Wrenching the relic from the wall, he filled his lungs and blew a tremendous blast.

The blast of the horn resounded deafeningly in the confined space. Derezong took several steps, lest one of the Lotris locate him by sound and cut him down in the dark, and blew again. With loud tramplings and clankings, the guards of King Vuar approached. The door burst open and in they came with weapons ready and torches high.

"Take them!" said King Vuar, pointing at the Lotris.

One of the Lotris tried to resist, but a guardsman's sword sheared the hand from his arm as he swung, and the Lotri yelled and sank to the floor to bleed to death. The others were subdued with little trouble.

"Now," said the king, "I can give you the boon of a quick death, or I can turn you over to the tormentors for a slower and much more interesting one. Do you confess your plans and purposes in full, the former alternative shall be permitted you. Speak."

The Lotri who had led the others when they entered the room said: "Know, King, that I am Paanuvel, the husband of Ilepro. The others are gentlemen of the court of Ilepro's brother Konesp, High Chief of Lotor."

"Gentlemen!" snorted King Vuar.

"As my brother-in-law has no sons of his own, he and I concocted this sublime scheme for bringing his kingdom and yours under the eventual united rule of my son Pendetr. This magician of yours was to steal the Eye of Tandyla, so that, when Ilepro

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conjured up the daev Tr'lang, the monster would not assail her as she'd be protected by the gem's powers; it should, instead, dispose of you. For we knew that no lesser creature of the outer dimensions could assail you whilst you wear the ring of star-metal. Then she'd proclaim the child Pendetr king, as you've already named him heir, with herself as regent till he comes of age. But the antisorcellarious virtues of this jewel are evidently not what they once were, for Tr'lang engulfed my wife though she thrust the gem in's maw."

"You have spoken well and frankly," said King Vuar, "though I question the morality of turning your wife over to me as my concubine, yourself being not only alive but present here in disguise. However, the customs of the Lotris are not ours. Lead them out, guards, and take off their heads."

"One more word, King," said Paanuvel. "For myself I care little, now that my beloved Ilepro's gone. But I ask that you make not the child Pendetr suffer for his father's faulty schemes."

"I will think on't. Now, off with you and with your heads." The king turned to Derezong Taash, who was mopping at his flesh-wound. "What is the cause of the failure of the Eye of Tandyla?"

DEREZONG, in fear and trembling, told the true tale of their foray into Lotor and their subsequent theft of the sapphire in Bienkar.

"Aha!" said King Vuar. "So that's what we get for not counting the rays seen in the stone!"

He paused to pick up the jewel from where it lay upon the floor, and the quaking Derezong foresaw his own severance, like that which the Lotris were even now experiencing.

Then Vuar smiled thinly. "A fortunate failure, it seems," said the king. "I am indebted to you both, first for your shrewdness in penetrating the plans of the Lotris to usurp the throne of Lorsk, second for fighting beside me to such good purpose this night.

"Howsoever, we have here a situation fraught with some slight embarrassment. For King Daior is a good friend of mine, which friendship I would not willingly forego. And even though I should return the gem to him with explanation and apology, the fact that my servants purloined it in the first place would not sit well with him. My command to you, therefore, is to return at once to Bienkar—"

"Oh, no!" cried Derezong Taash, the words escaping involuntarily from him under the impetus of strong emotion.

"—return to Bienkar," continued the king as if he had not heard, "and smuggle the jewel back to its original position in the crown of the King of Zhysk, without letting anyone know that you are involved either in the disappearance of the stone or in its eventual restoration. For such accomplished rogues as you and your apprentice have shown yourselves to be, this slight feat will pose no serious obstacle. And so goodnight, my lord sorcerer."

King Vuar threw his bearskin about him and tramped off to his apartments, leaving Derezong and Zhamel staring at one another with expressions of mingled horror and a vast dismay.

THE END

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READER'S PAGE

ONE MAN'S MEAT...

Dear Sir:

I've been reading your magazine for five years now, and the other day I came across an issue from 1947 containing a story by Charles F. Myers. Now, seeing as how I do not get every issue, I apparently have missed the "Toffee" stories. Being a Thorne Smith fan, I would like to get those issues containing these stories. Can you help me in any way?

Gerry Holzman
1824½ S. Highland Avenue
Los Angeles 19, California

...IS ANOTHER MAN'S POISON

Dear Editor:

I wish to add my praise of your magazine to your Reader's Page. It is tops in its field. I have been reading FANTASTIC and AMAZING since pre-war days and have never once complained of your choice of stories, but please, please, no more "Toffee"—too much like Thorne Smith's work. One can buy T. Smith's work at any dime, drug, or department store in pocket books. And one can soon get well filled up on that type of thing. And then to FANTASTIC—horrors!

I like humor in stories very much and was an ardent reader of the Hank Cleaver and Lancelot Biggs stories in pre-war days.

Mrs. John P. Gates
14 Barnes Avenue
White River Jct., Vermont

Perhaps Mrs. Gates would like to send Mr. Holzman her copies of the FANTASTIC issues which contain the "Toffee" stories..... Ed.

WANTED—BACK COVERS!

Dear Sir:

I have a suggestion for you. From time to time, fans have asked for the return of the illustrated back cover. You have not seen fit to grant these requests. No doubt you have your reasons. So I have been wondering: Would it be possible for you to issue the Paul "Life on Other Worlds" covers, in either portfolio or book form? I realize such a portfolio or book would be expensive, but the tremendous success of a series of paintings by the artist Chesley Bonestell, issued in book form, under the title of "The Conquest of Space" should be some indication of the reception a book of Paul covers would receive. The Bonestell book sold for $3.95, yet the book dealer who sold my copy said he could not catch up with his orders. 'Nuff said.

Roger N. Dard
232 James Street
Perth, Western Australia

Thanks for your suggestion, Rog. However, at this time, it is not practical for us to assume such a project. We hope in the not too distant future to be able to resume using illustrations for the back covers of our magazines.....Ed.

ANYBODY KNOW MORE SUPERLATIVES?

Dear Ed:

I'd like to stack my words of praise with all those others that you have accumulated. It's a pretty big bundle, so I'd appreciate a helping hand from one of your staff with a large vocabulary. I keep running out and have to use some of the old standards like terrific and wonderful. At times I think there aren't enough words.

Lee Hoffman
101 Wagner Street
Savannah, Ga.

Thanks, Lee. This is what we like to hear—and we'll keep on running stories that will keep you feeling this way....Ed.

WELL, MR. HAMLING...?

Dear Sir:

I am writing this in order to pick one rather large bone with you. I am sorry to have to lambaste Mr. Hamling after his leaving the Ziff-Davis chain, but I feel that I must. I refer to the editorial in the February 1951 issue of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES.

In the first place, Mr. Hamling says the film "Destination Moon" lacked a story. Perhaps so, in the exact sense of the word. But I ask you, what could be more dramatic than the first four men on the moon facing the possibility of having to die there? Seems to me that that is all the conflict you need to make a story.

Secondly, Mr. Hamling goes on to imply that in a story, boy meets girl—falls in love—etc., is more important than

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artistic verisimilitude. Perhaps so—but not—definitely not, in a picture of such great importance as "Destination Moon". To my mind, the first of the science-fiction movies (of which I hope there will be many) should without doubt place technical excellence before all things. This, "Destination Moon" did; this, "Rocketship XM" did not do.

In re technical excellence, I refer to a letter in the February AMAZING STORIES from one Maurice Raboid which pretty well covers the facts. But to go further: Ley has calculated that chances of running into a meteor shower are roughly 1:500,000. In space—which has always been thought to have been a near-vacuum—the intrepid travelers not only run into a meteor shower consisting of large size meteors (which is most unlikely in itself), but through the superhuman efficiency of sound track, one actually hears the rushing passage of these celestial intruders as they go merrily past. I noticed also that although the ship was obviously in free-fall, the passengers walked around without trouble, while everything else floated as it was supposed to.

What gives? Have the laws of Newton et. al. suddenly been repealed for animate objects? Anyway, I object! I could go on forever, but I would just as soon leave the memory of "Rocketship XM" far, far behind me.

It seems to me that you style yourself a *science*-fantasy mag (italics mine). Why, then, the sudden idea of story over science in movies? Although I sometimes feel that it's the same way in your book, I do think that you strive for the science angle somewhat.

Here's the thing, as it seems to me. Science-fiction is coming of age now, and fans, editors, publishers and authors ought to do as much as possible to keep it on its feet. So, for the love of God, when some hairbrained Hollywoodian decides to produce an epic that is no better—if not worse—than the late unlamented Flash Gordon potboilers, an epic that does not have science but worse, has incorrect and totally erroneous ideas put forth, let us all get aboard the bandwagon and perhaps do what we can to give Hollywood the right idea.

So if we have to have story, let's for Pete sake see if we can't have it backed up with accurate science. Better by far three dozen pix of the caliber of "Destination Moon" than one piece of bilge like "Rocketship XM". Sorry, Mr. Hamling, but that's the way I feel.

Anthony K. Van Riper
3673 East 4th Street
Tucson, Arizona

Dear Editor:

Grr! I am on the warpath. Did you read what you said about "Destination Moon?" Lacked a story? Ha! And again Ha! (All of this with a sneer in my voice, of course.) As far as sheer entertainment value, it was so far above "Rocketship XM" (and I'm not talking about it scientifically) that you can no more compare the two, than you can compare Venus de Milo with something a kindergarten kid makes out of clay. I saw the picture twice, once in August, and again recently. Both times I enjoyed it far more than "Rocketship XM". Finally, I only know one other person in all this highschool who reads science-fiction (and he prefers it to the comic strips). Yet, all those who saw it were virtually unanimous in declaring it strictly terrific.

Now for the issue: First of all, congratulations for having a cover illo that both illustrated a scene from "Sword of Ra" and kept the girl in somewhat more than a Mother Eve costume. In fact, all your inside illustrations fit the stories they were supposed to illustrate.

As for the stories: "The Sword of Ra"—very good, best in the issue, I guess, but by no wide margin. Not as good, though, as "Mistress of the Djinn" was. It was far too short. It could have been a good twenty-five pages longer with no harm to anyone.

The rest of the stories were all good, but all pretty much the same, with "The Man Who Hated Tuesday" number 3, and "Rebirth" next to the lead novel in the issue mainly because of the ideas behind the story. Not merely the cure or punishment of a criminal, but the complete eradication of said criminal, leaving in his place the criminal's "other self"—what he might have been.

Referring to the topic Gerald Hibbs brought up, personally I feel the reason science-fiction is written from a man's viewpoint (you see it through the man's mind, etc. etc. etc.) is because mostly men write s-f. When a writer writes a story, he usually puts himself into the part of the leading character. Therefore, if a man does the writing, it is far easier to have the hero male than it would be to project his personality into the part of a sweet young thing in skirts. I know that when I write a story, it's far more natural for me to have the lead character a woman, than to think with the viewpoint of a husky six-footer, or whatever size he is. Not that it can't be done. (Don't worry, ye Ed, you'll probably never get a manuscript from me as I'd be too scared to send one in.)

Arline Gingold
60 Elm Street
Ellenville, N. Y.

SO NOW IT'S BLOCH...

Dear Editor:

I just re-read Robert Bloch's "The Devil With You" in the August 1950 FA. This is a story that made me mad with envy. This happens very rarely, but with one consistent author—Robert Bloch. Its plot, treatment, character development and pacing is a beautiful thing to see. I'd have

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given my complete set of UNKNOWN's if I could have written that. However, Mr. Bloch often inspires me with that feeling (as do Bradbury, Sturgeon, del Rey and Hubbard) of jealous hatred. For me, this all too short novel was one of the finest things I have yet seen in FANTASTIC ADVENTURES. Speaking of UNKNOWN, FA seems to be the only magazine published that is trying to present that fine genre to the public. May I hope that that is the editorial policy? It would be a godsend to an awful lot of readers (and writers, including myself).

Bloch's "The Devil With You" captured much more of Thorne Smith's intrinsic humor than did Charles Myers' recent novel, as good as that was. All the subtle wordage that made Thorne Smith stand out as a great writer as well as humorist, wasn't lost on Bloch as it was on Myers. Also, the scene changes were expertly handled—something of a feat when you have a boatload of whacky characters.

I have read Robert Bloch's stories since 1935—from the "Feast in the Abbey" up to the present one, and watching his developments (I'm speaking as an old man of 23) has been one of my favorite pastimes.

One of the first few of his humorous yarns—things like "A Sorcerer Runs for Sheriff" and the "Nursemaid to Nightmares" series (there were two, I think) gave me several hints as to how fine a humorist he could become. Some of the funniest things I ever read by him, though, were the letters he used to write WEIRD TALES in the early forties which were published by them in the letters column. I once wrote him a letter commenting on this fact, but I never got a reply.

Getting back to the story: Only two things about it made me sad. (1) He should have taken more time at the beginning and developed Bill Dawson's life in Davenport, and showed how, why, and what an inhibited character he was—thus creating a more three dimensional character and make his change into a happy guzzling, loose-living friendly Thorne Smithian reprobate even more dramatic and satisfying. (2) Thorne Smith, in each of his novels, always had some Shakespeare-like change of pace where the protagonist sat down and thought—usually coming out with some neat philosophically bitter commentaries on various aspects of today's society. This mainly served to heighten interest—and it usually succeeded. Anyhow, the only real fault I can find is with its length. Thanks again for a wonderful time—thanks to both of you.

Dennis Strong
943 Scribner Street
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Thanks for a fine letter, Dennis. And maybe you will have inspired Bob Bloch to turn out another fine story.....Ed.

MORE COMING UP

Dear Ed:

I just bought the February ish of FA today. Having read in the January editorial about G. St. R's "The Sword of Ra", I read it first. Just finished it. REAL GOOD. EXCELLENT. SUPERB. How 'bout a sequel or something like that? Well, anyway let's have some more of Bob Krepps' yarns.

David Rike
Box 203
Rodeo, California

Bob Krepps is plotting something for us right now—so we hope it won't be too long before he'll be back with us.....Ed.

NO RICH AUNT NECESSARY

Dear Sirs:

Can a plain ordinary fan get a word of praise in edgewise, or do you have to be somebody's rich aunt?

I've been an ardent fan of your Ziff-Davis mags, one and all, ever since my brother let me have one, when I was about 8 years old. The only complaint I can think of is that sometimes I have to tear the cover off before I bring it (the mag) home. Either that or hide the whole thing. The stories are swell, but why not have the cover at least *match* a story? I mean at least it could picture an incident in the story, instead of some babe trying for a bad cold or a good suntan.

Betty Kerns
Box 14
Meade, Kansas

We try to make our covers at least fit the mood of the story, although usually they actually illustrate or suggest a scene. ..... Ed.

SHE LIKES TO LAUGH

Dear Editor:

I have just finished reading your FA Quarterly for the winter of 1950 and I wish to say that I think it is extremely good. I think that you will understand, however, that we each have our own ideas about the kind of stories we like best, and that we (women especially) quite often rate the stories we read according to our own desires—whether for suspense, laughter, style, characters, drama, etc.

As you will see, I have rated these by suspense and laughs first. Well, here we go:

Laughs

1. "The Devil With You"—by Robert Bloch. The best—I'm still laughing. I'll be looking for more stories by him.
2. "Well I'll Be Hexed!"—by Peter Phillips. Excellent—all I can think of to say is just what Bertram said. More like this, Mr. Phillips, please.

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3. "Shouldn't Happen To A Dog"—by Frances M. Deegan. Excellent—some people have all the luck. Now, why can't I write like that?
4. "End Of Your Rope"—by Bloch. Not quite as good as No. 1.
5. "No Head for My Bier"—by Lester del Rey. Good.
6. "The Reluctant Genii"—by P. F. Costello. Good, but Reggie seems impossibly dumb.

Suspense

1. "You're All Alone"—Fritz Leiber. Excellent—more like this.
2. "The Ship Sails At Midnight"—Leiber. Excellent.
3. "Author Unknown"—by Albert Bernsen. Excellent.
4. "Detonator"—by Walt Sheldon. Excellent. More like this.
5. "The Broken Doll"—by Paul W. Fairman. Excellent. More like this.
6. "The Last Bounce"—by William Tenn. Excellent. More.
7. "Warrior Queen of Mars"—by Alexander Blade. Excellent. Give us a sequel on Tom Farmer.
8. "Your Rope is Waiting"—by William Brengle. Good.
9. "Where Tall Towers Gleam"—by R. M. Williams. Excellent.
10. "Survival"—by William P. McGivern. Good.
11. "The Ice Cream Tree"—by H. B. Hickey. Good.
12. "Loreli Street"—by Craig Browning. Excellent.
13. "The Fifty Child"—by August Derleth. Good.
14. "Window to the Past"—Chester S. Geier. Good.

All of your art work is the best so what more can I say except to repeat an old quotation: "You can't please everybody all the time, it just ain't human nature, so let the majority rule." Or better still, please yourself and forget about what others think. The best of luck to you.

Mrs. Earl E. Blevins
Apt. 80, Donald Court
Huntington, W. Va.

In pleasing ourselves, we trust that we are pleasing the great majority of our readers..... Ed.

AND FROM ACROSS THE SEA...

Dear Sirs:

I am a woman fan of FA—not that you can call me a woman, as I am only seventeen. I hope you will print this letter on the reader's page. Well, I like your mag a lot, although some of the stories give me the creeps when I am alone.

I am not able to get your mag monthly. If you do print my letter, I wonder if one of your many readers will send me the mag in which it appears.

I'm looking forward to visiting your country one day.

Here's hoping I read many more of your FA; they really are grand.

Mary A. Morley
18 Mansergh Street
Burnley
Lancs, England

Editors:

I am writing this with the hope of seeing it on the Reader's Page. A few weeks ago, I would never have expected to see it. The reason for this is, I am glad to say, they have started printing your magazines, FA and AMAZING over here, and I am also glad to say they are printed exactly the same, except for advertisements on the back cover, as they are over there. We have other reprints over here, but they are only about 1/3 of the original thickness. The stories are very good, only I thought "The Face Beyond the Veil" ended just as it was getting interesting.

I first became acquainted with your mags when I bought some pre-war ones from a collector. The last ones I had were 1939 ones (AMAZING). They were terrific stories in those days (they tell me). When I had read them I tried all sorts of places to get recent copies, but no could do, and now to my joy they are printing them here. I'm looking forward to the rest of the issues.

I would like to get in touch with some s-f fans, especially Burroughs fans. I would also like to exchange some magazines.

P. Ogden
3 Belgrave Road
Morton, Blackpool,
England

DOUBLING UP ON FINLAY

Dear Editors:

Why don't you have more fantasy and less science-fiction at least in FANTASTIC ADVENTURES, because after all its title is Fantastic. Also, why don't you have Finlay in every issue, or am I asking too much?

Talking about fantasy, I mean vampires and werewolves—stories like Lovecraft's and some of Merritt's.

Carlysle Gentry
Barretts Ferry, Kentucky

Well, there are two Finlay illustrations in the lead story itself this month, Carlysle. How's that for anticipating your desires?..... Ed.

FANTASY VERSUS SCIENCE-FICTION

Dear Editor:

Besides my work as a graphologist and free lance writer, my favorite recreation is reading science-fiction-fantasy, with the accent on the last named. For some time, I have been reading your mag-

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azine, and though I like most of the stories, I wish that there was less of science-fiction and more of the fantastic, supernatural and really imaginative pieces.

The above is the only criticism I have, for I feel if a good thing can't be said about an author or his story, it's best to have nothing uttered at all.

I agree wholeheartedly with Calvin Thos. Beck about the "features" part of FA being one of the greatest steady assets of the magazine, also the letters department. These short articles help break up and make up the pages, making for easy reading. They serve as a mental refresher before going into another story, a sort of relaxation period. I really enjoy them.

Before I close, I would like to ask the readers a very broad question: Who do you think is the greatest living science-fiction-fantasy writer of both books and magazine stories?

Lee Louis Martello
9 Hook Street
Southbridge, Mass.

There's the question, fans. What's your answer?..... Ed.

ANDY, WHERE ARE YOU?

Dear Sir:

Years ago, we had Thorne Smith for our humorous situations; then, along came Robert Moore Williams and he dove into the act—and now, Robert Bloch is diving head first into the stream of humor.

It's all very nice, but highly confusing—or has Thorne arisen from his alcoholic slumber and come back to invest his talents on various and sundry other writers?

Normally, FANTASTIC ADVENTURES is one of my favorite magazines; this month, however, it is tops—all those nice impossible stories. However, having read the magazine since its inception, I will continue to read it until blindness sets in, and then will start praying you come out in Braille. That's about the only way you aren't published, isn't it—or do you have that market sewed up too? If not, I personally think it would be a good idea.

For—(hand over mouth, mumbling)—years, I never could figure out why people wrote letters to editors. Now I know—they just bought a new typewriter and couldn't resist the temptation to try it out.

However, as this is some sort of an anniversary to me, I just want to thank you and your sister publication, AMAZING STORIES, for years of wonderful reading, and I hope that I shall be reading both of them for many years to come.

And now, for my ulterior motive. I seem to have misplaced a room-mate, so if this is published—please, in a plaintive voice—Andy, where are you? And why don't you write?

Thank you very much for your time, and I repeat, I'm just a satisfied customer who buys your magazines every month, and the only criticism I have is that you don't come out as a daily. When you do that, I will have no further need for seeking Utopia—I'll be in it.

Glen W. Daniels
General Delivery
Capitola, California

REPRINTS AGAIN

Dear Editor:

When editors and fans talk of reprints, they usually fail to mention what kind of reprints they're speaking of. It makes a difference. If they're contending that science-fiction stories have no place in reprint magazines, I agree with them. But if they're talking about fantasy, I disagree. Science is outmoded, but fantasy—never. The beautiful thing about Merritt, Haggard, Lewis, Stilson, Howard, and others, is that they contain no scientific gadgets which, within a few years after the stories are written, become realities. For this reason, they will be enjoyed by fantasy fans as long as there are fantasy fans to read them.

On the other hand, some fantasy and most s-f will become stale in the years to come simply because the gadgets in them are in use and are, therefore, not fantastic to the people of that day. Take, for example, G. A. England's "Flying Legion". Only the superb characterization, beautiful writing, and educational setting and information contained in this great fantasy make it readable by modern fans. The airship, which was supposed to be the fantasy of the story, is out-moded. Therefore, strictly speaking, it is no longer fantasy but mere fiction.

I remember that somebody spoke of the possibility that when the reprint mags use up all the good stories of yester year (No, I'm not advertising either *Merita* or *The Lone Ranger*), they will print the mediocre stuff. That argument against reprints has such a big hole in it that even I see it. The reprint mags of today use the material printed 20 or 30 years ago. Thus, the reprint mags of 20 or 30 years in the future will use the stories which are being written and published today. As the stories of one decade give out, the mags can shift to those of the next, and on to the next, etc. This fact makes the exhaustion of good material impossible.

Since I'm in a disagreeing mood, I might as well disagree with Mr. Donald V. Allgeier on his statement that there aren't enough good authors to turn out enjoyable material for all the science-fiction mags on the stands today and that, therefore, the reprint mags are justified in rejecting the work of modern authors and drawing upon material which has already thrilled its share of people.

I agree that there are too few good authors in s-f fiction. But just think how the guys who are up there got to be good. Most of them started out as hacks pro-

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ducing mediocre material and gradually developed to their present status. If there had been no market for that mediocre material which they produced in their early career, how many of them would have kept on writing? Some would have, of course, but the larger percentage would have turned to some other method of earning a living. Who knows, maybe we wouldn't be seeing names like de Camp, Phillips, Hubbard, Anderson, van Vogt, on the contents pages of our favorite magazines if they hadn't made a reasonable number of sales when they first started writing.

I've got to close now, but first I'd like to make a request and a plug.

The request: I'd like to correspond with any fans in N. C. or the adjoining states or any teen-age fans in any part of the world.

The plug: My plug is for a fine club. Young Fandom is not solely for young fans, as most people think, it is also for those who are young in fandom. So if you're young in age, or in fandom, or both—write to the secretary of our club, Arniece Gurley, Oswego, Ill., for information. Information doesn't obligate you to join, but we'd like to have you.

Tom Covington
315 Dawson Street
Wilmington, N. C.

NO WINGS AT ALL

By Clyde Moore

BETWEEN the rocket for interplanetary space which requires no wings at all and the conventional airplane which requires elaborate airfoils, exists a region in which *new* wing development is extremely important. This refers to the jet and turbine aircraft whose velocities range from five hundred miles an hour to many times the speed of sound. The importance of wing-study can be suggested by an examination of the peculiar wing shapes of the newer jet aircraft. These are not due simply to a designer's fancy, but are the product of some of the most concentrated research in the world.

A wing is ordinarily designed to provide lift to fast-flying plane. But unfortunately one type of wing-shape isn't good for all speeds. At low speeds, a thick bulky structure of great strength is needed and large surfaces are also necessary. But at high speeds simplicity as well as strength must be the keynote. Furthermore air doesn't behave the same at high speeds and the omnipresent shock waves must be dealt with. These disturbances of the air which can tear a plane apart, must be carefully considered when designing. In wind-tunnels and experimental labs as well as on paper, hundreds and hundreds of new designs are presented, considered and discarded with some few basic shapes lasting.

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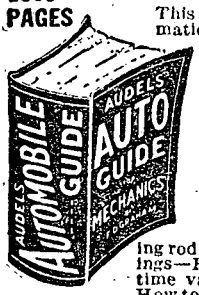

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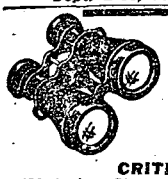

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stubby seems to be the ultimate evolution. This shape as tried on hundreds of aircraft has strength and yet does not disintegrate when it passes through the sonic barrier. From the experience gained with this type of shape it is conceivable that the first Lunar rockets will use some sort of similar wing to act as an auxiliary guide and stabalizer through the atmosphere though in space itself of course the wing will have no function at all.

INTESTINAL FORTITUDE

By L. A. Burt

IT APPEARS nowadays that you don't have to have guts to live! And we mean that literally! Ordinarily threading its way in a tortuous labyrinthine path through the human body is about seventeen or eighteen feet of small intestine, through which one's food passes and from which the essential nourishment and energy is extracted. This food absorber has always been thought to be a critical human gadget without which one was *kaput*. But a study of medical operations and records is revealing some interesting facts.

For one thing, a human being can, if necessary, get along with as little as two feet of "gut". If any fact ever demonstrated the amazing adaptability of the human organism, this surely is it! Incredible though it may seem, the records disclose that a number of people have had such amounts of small intestine removed, leaving them with a mere fraction of a yard, and they have lived and remained quite healthy. The body reacts in an utterly familiar and logical way to compensate for this tremendous loss of food absorber.

First, the small intestine, or what remains of it, expands, becomes larger in diameter and surface and hence is able to absorb more food. The colon, secondly, takes over a portion of the job. But what is most startling, the body itself becomes lighter, due to the reduced food intake, and thus the requirements for food-intake are lessened, lessening the load on the remaining small intestine.

Patients who have suffered this loss of small intestine naturally take some time to adjust to their changed situation. There is stomach discomfort and a feeling of hunger; food intake must be watched and reduced, but within a comparatively short time, the person lives a completely normal life eating the foods everyone else eats.

The future certainly looks good, when you see with what little natural apparatus a body can get along. Maybe the satirical science-fictionists who have pointed out that Man is becoming nothing but a huge head on a spindly body are on the right track! But men will always require the metaphorical "guts". You've got to have them in this competitive world!

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RELATIVITY AND QUANTA

By Leo Patterson

AT A RECENT meeting of a scientific group, the members were asked what they thought was the greatest scientific invention of the Twentieth Century. Numerous and varied though the answers were, the chairman of the panel insisted, after listening to members cite everything from the electric motor to the five cent cigar, that the members were really off the track. He admitted that to cite the vacuum tube as our greatest invention was probably correct, but too limited. He pointed out that the members, while citing material inventions were neglecting the realm of ideas which was basically more important than that of "things".

He proposed, and scientists seem to agree, that the greatest and most important scientific advances of the Twentieth Century were the Quantum Theory of Max Planck and the Relativity Theory of Einstein. These ideas encompass all of the progress of modern science, opening men's eyes to a new world view which they never suspected prior to the innovations.

The Quantum Theory, with its discontinuous nature of energy, and its explanation of atomic phenomena, oriented Man at one end of the scale—the microscopic. The Relativity Theory oriented Man at the other end—stars and galaxies. Thus, finally, after centuries of complete distinction between atoms and stars, the two were brought together with Man in the middle. In terms of practicality, both of these ideas stimulated science and scientists so much that nine out of ten "practical" inventions in one way or another stem from them, or at least were enabled to be developed by a consideration of them.

Long after most inventions are forgotten or so modified by time that they are unrecognizable, both the Quantum Theory and the Relativity Theory will be taught in schools and will be effecting changes in both men's ideas and in the way they make things!

ASTRONAUTIC ADVANCES

By A. T. Kedzie

EVEN SO staid and conservative a publication of amateur astronomy as *Sky and Telescope*, cannot resist the allure of rocketry. Ordinarily, this dignified publication steers clear of sensationalism. It still does, but recently it ran an article by Kenneth Gatland of the design department of a British aircraft concern. His article was on advances in astronautics, and it shows to what extent rocketry has

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progressed even in this day. Furthermore, it is told in such a matter-of-fact tone and with such calm evaluation, that it makes rocketry appear to be just what it is: A modern scientific industry which is advancing slowly, not solely the property of science-fiction addicts.

Gatland's thesis is that rocketry is firmly established in basic principle, and that with sufficient money and interest, it will advance rapidly to the point where we will have, first, a satellite rocket circling the Earth, and second, we will plant a rocket on the Moon. He also tells some fascinating things about the German V-2's successor, the "A-10" which was well beyond the drawing board stage when the war ended. This fabulous rocket was to skip over the upper atmosphere for better than three thousand miles.

The famous technician, Dr. Von Braun, also had plans for putting a satellite rocket at an altitude of four hundred miles. This would have hovered in a circular orbit around the Earth and served as a useful stepping stone to the Moon. And this point is basic in Gatland's article. While the number three or four stage step-rocket can be built to make the Moon trip, it appears as if technology will use the more logical satellite technique first. In terms of energy considerations, it is so much simpler and economical to build a satellite rocket which will circle the Earth at some moderate altitude, such as five hundred or a thousand miles, and which will serve as a stepping stone to eliminate the enormous losses of aerial friction and the initial tug of gravity.

Actually, Gatland doesn't say anything new, but he so cogently summarizes the whole field of rocketry that his essay is extremely attractive. He sees the present difficulties with chemical rockets, and hopes that an atomic rocket will be developed. But regardless of the latter, he knows that the Moon will be reached—and in not so great a time.

The satellite technique intrigues him. He sees numerous rockets shot up to the "supply" or "tanker" level, where they will circle the Earth endlessly. These rockets will serve as satellites and bases from which the actual Lunar-bound rockets will proceed. Gatland talks matter-of-factly about contacting these rockets by matching to their speeds and then connecting with them by means of ordinary "line-rockets", such as are used in present life-saving work at sea. Men in space suits will then transfer the fuel from the satellite rockets to the Lunar rocket. Eventually, a regular system will be set-up. Gatland envisions practically a whole industrial system.

The "sub-rockets" as he calls the satellites are definitely in the cards. Gatland believes, as do other rocketeers, that they are the real key to the eventual conquering of space. Certainly chemical rockets won't do the job without them.

THE END

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